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County Lines

Professor John Pitts

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## Foreword

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HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth offending services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth offending services.

This report was kindly produced by Professor John Pitts, highlighting how County Lines operations have moved to the country and expanded over recent years. Responses to County Lines have often been patchy and poorly coordinated, and the importance of multi-agency approaches is clearly illustrated, involving criminal justice, welfare and educational agencies, with a strong understanding of roles and responsibilities and a focus on information sharing. The importance of engaging local communities is also evident, helping to maximise credibility and capacity through the use of local resources and interventions, and the integration of community members, particularly gang-involved and gang-affected children. Both probation and youth offending services have a key role to play.



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### Author profile

John Pitts is Vauxhall Professor of Socio-legal Studies at the University of Bedfordshire and joint-Director of the Vauxhall Centre for the Study of Crime. He is a Visiting Professor of Criminology at the Universities of Kent and Suffolk. He has worked in publishing and as a school teacher; a street and club-based youth worker; a youth justice worker, a group worker in a Young Offender Institution and as a consultant on youth crime and youth justice to the police, youth justice and legal professionals in the UK, mainland Europe, the Russian Federation and China. In the past fifteen years he has undertaken studies of violent youth gangs, organised crime groups and drug markets in London, Manchester, Birmingham, West Yorkshire and East Anglia. He has acted as an adviser on violent youth gangs to local authorities and police forces. He was a consultant to the *Centre for Social Justice* inquiry into violent youth gangs in the UK and a participant in the *Prime Minister's Gang Summit* in October 2011. He was deputy chair of the *London Gangs Forum* and a member of the *Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child and Adolescent Sexual Exploitation* (2013). More recently he was a member of the team evaluating the *Breaking the Cycle of Violence* programme.

**The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation.**

## 1. Introduction

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County Lines are criminal networks based mainly in cities that export illegal drugs to one or more out-of-town locations. The organisers use dedicated mobile phone lines to take orders from buyers, and children and vulnerable adults to transport, store and deliver the drugs. County Lines organisers may use coercion, intimidation and violence (including sexual violence) to control this workforce.

Initially, the 'Youngers', the children involved, may be given money, phones or expensive trainers, but are then told they must repay this by working for the County Lines gang. Sometimes the 'Elders', the organisers, arrange for them to be robbed of the drugs they are carrying so that they become indebted. If they protest, they may be told to keep working to pay off the debt or they, and their families, will be subject to violent retribution. The 'Youngers', who deliver the drugs, risk being apprehended by the police, assaulted and robbed by their customers or by members of rival gangs (Andell and Pitts, 2018; Harding, 2020).

This *Academic Insights* paper sets out how County Lines operations have developed and evolved over recent years. Focus is then given to multi-agency ways of tackling County Lines which involve probation and youth offending services.

## 2. County Lines: Evolving approaches and responses

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### 2.1 Escape to the country

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most illicit drug markets run by street gangs were concentrated in, or adjacent to, gang-affected neighbourhoods or nearby transport hubs (Pitts, 2008; Harding, 2014; Densley, 2014; Andell, 2019; Whittaker et al. 2017). However, from around 2010 a combination of factors caused gang-related drug dealing to 'Go Country'. Simon Harding (2020) argues that because of the policies of austerity, legitimate routes out of poverty for many children in the poorest parts of the inner city worsened significantly and so more of them drifted, or were lured, into drug dealing. This meant that local drug markets became 'saturated' (Windle and Briggs, 2015). This in turn led to an intensification of violence between rival gangs as they fought for 'market share', with a concomitant rise in homicides, serious injury, arrests and incarceration (Windle and Briggs, 2015; Pitts, 2016; Whittaker et al., 2017; Andell and Pitts, 2018; Andell, 2019).

While 'Going Country' had been a minor sideline for drug-dealing street gangs since early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Pitts, 2008; Andell and Pitts, 2010; Harding, 2014; 2020), it now appeared to offer a solution to the dangers gang affiliates faced in local drug markets. The 'Country' option was also attractive because, out-of-town, the urban dealers and their runners met with less attention from the police and less resistance from local dealers (Shapiro and Daly, 2017). Moreover, successful police operations against local dealers had created gaps in the market which urban street gangs were only too ready to fill (Andell and Pitts, 2018).

Nikki Holland, the National Crime Agency (NCA) County Lines lead, notes that whereas in 2015 only seven of the UK's 44 police forces were reporting County Lines activity, by 2018 all 44 forces reported their presence (Grierson, 2019). Whereas in November 2017 the NCA estimated that there were at least 720 County Lines operating in England and Wales, by 2020 this figure was revised upwards to 2,000+, with at least 283 lines originating in London (National Crime Agency, 2017; 2017b; 2019).

Between 2012 and 2016, convictions of children aged 10 to 17 for 'possession of Class A drugs with intent to supply' increased by 77% (Ministry of Justice, 2017). This was three times the increase among adult offenders. As Robinson et al. (2019, p.14) observe:

*'While some of these young people are "user dealers", or individual entrepreneurs working "solo", many others are embedded within gangs and organized criminal networks.'*

Research undertaken by the Mayor of London's office in 2020 estimated that between January 2018 and April 2019, 4,013 young Londoners were involved with County Lines. The largest group were teenagers aged between 15 and 19 (46 per cent), followed by 20 to 25-year-olds (29 per cent) (Busby, 2019).

County Lines involve both children and adults, and collaborative working between agencies is therefore crucial. In 2018 the Metropolitan Police estimated that over 60% of gang members in the capital were involved in drug dealing. And while the MET's 'Gangs Matrix' recorded 521 gang members aged 18 or younger, there were 2,318 aged between 18 and 25 (Metropolitan Police, 2018). If and when apprehended, many in this latter group would become the responsibility of the probation service.

## 2.2 The expansion of County Lines

In the past decade the County Lines model has evolved. 'Going Country' has given the gangs far greater market reach and some of the organisers have moved permanently into the coastal and county towns where their business is done. This has allowed them to forge links with local criminal business organisations and recruit local children as runners who can market the drugs in their schools, colleges and neighbourhoods (Andell and Pitts, 2018; Jaensch and South, 2018). Youth Offending Team (YOT) staff report that whereas initially the runners were shipped in from the cities for a few days at a time and were usually known to children's services and the YOTs where they lived, increasingly they are local children with no previous links to welfare or criminal justice agencies. The County Lines 'offer' has also changed, with a broader range of products being offered to an expanding client base that is less reliant on addicts, targeting instead adult and adolescent 'recreational' users (Andell and Pitts, 2018).

Between 2013 and 2020 the proportion of adults aged 16 to 59 reporting any drug use rose by 15%, while for 16 to 24-year-olds the figure was 28% (Black, 2020). Dame Carol Black's independent *Review of Drugs* (Home Office 2020) noted that the 'illegal drugs market has never caused greater harm', observing that the 4,359 illicit drug-related deaths in England and Wales in 2018, a rise of 16% on the previous year, were the highest on record. While most of these deaths were linked to heroin, there was also a fivefold increase in cocaine deaths between 2011 and 2019.

Data held by the police also indicates that knife violence is endemic in County Lines drug dealing. The vast majority (85%) of police forces report the use of knives, and three-quarters (74%) report the use of firearms. Nick Davison, assistant chief constable of Norfolk Constabulary, speaks of "ultra-violence" where younger recruits maintain status by executing acts of "increasingly outrageous savagery".

*"Beatings turn to stabbings in the buttock, then the chest, the face. If you don't, you become vulnerable to becoming a victim of that behavior."*

Townsend, 2019

## 2.3 What is to be done?

Potential responses include attempting to prevent the importation of heroin and cocaine, the decriminalisation of the possession of illicit drugs, and governmental regulation of the quality of the drugs and the eligibility of users. But the focus in this paper is upon responses involving those delivering probation and youth offending services.

### **Place-based multi-agency intervention**

In London, the boroughs with most children linked to County Lines are Lambeth, Newham and Croydon (Busby, 2019). There is also a growing body of research evidence and police intelligence concerning the out-of-town target destinations (Andell and Pitts, 2018). Evidence of this concentration of the organisers and children involved in County Lines suggests that place-based multi-agency interventions could be an important arm of any suppression strategy. In the mid-1990s a survey of research in 45 cities by the *National Youth Gang Suppression and Intervention Program* (USA) (Spergeland Grossman, 1998) found that successful place-based strategies involved a plurality of agencies and citizen groups with a shared definition of the problem, its origins, nature and dimensions. These

groupings established clear targets for agency and interagency intervention, and ensured that the strategies deployed by each of the partner agencies articulated with the others.

Similarly, in the UK, Brand and Ollerenshaw (2009) found that multi-agency gang strategies are successful if those leading them are able to exert control or influence over the commissioning and coordination of the strategy; the integration of community members, particularly gang-involved and gang-affected children; the targeting of local interventions; the credibility and capacity of the strategy and its review and evaluation. For this to work, however, each of the partners needs a clear understanding of:

- which aspects of the problem they are best equipped to address;
- their respective powers and responsibilities; and
- the benefits, both professional and fiscal, that they would gain by virtue of their involvement in the partnership (van Staden et al., 2011; Pitts et al., 2017).

## **Mapping**

Any serious intervention in a neighbourhood or with a network requires accurate mapping. Tilia Lenz (2019) was working as manager of an assessment team in rural Dorset in 2014 when she first became aware of County Lines. She spotted an emerging pattern in some of the new referrals of children and their parents. Increasing numbers referred to drug running, coercion and the sexual exploitation of boys and girls in small towns. She also became aware of stories shared in schools about children being taken by gang elders into the back of a van, and sexually or physically abused.

She started to map these incidents, inviting colleagues from other teams to do the same in order to trace connections between them, identify where this was happening and families that appeared to be involved. It emerged that in some cases, the parents of children were long-term Class A drug users whose homes had been 'cuckooed' by the dealers, thereby drawing the children into dealing the drugs. This data was fed into an IT system which allowed the professionals to record connections between individuals who were the victims or perpetrators of sexual and criminal exploitation; mindful that many children may have been both.

Today, Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) teams in several local authorities undertake this kind of mapping and several local authorities use exploitation risk assessment tools to make it easier to ask the right questions. To date, risk assessment tools to check gang and County Lines involvement have not been readily available to the probation service and communication about these matters between probation and prison staff remains fairly ad hoc. However, the reorganisation of the probation service presents opportunities for the development of information sharing protocols with prison service staff which could serve as a basis for 'mapping' the networks and the identification of vulnerable adults.

## **Operation Ceasefire**

To date, in the UK, enforcement in the field of gangs and drug trafficking has tended to take the form of what Ross Coomber et al. (2019) describe as 'symbolic policing' in which a major 'crackdown' produces a large number of highly publicised arrests, if not prosecutions. This policing style has more to do with being seen to be doing something rather than preventing or solving the problem. Most commentators believe that the most effective mode of intervention involves consistent, targeted, neighbourhood policing, in partnership with local residents, young and old, and relevant criminal justice, welfare and educational agencies, the prototype for which was *Operation Ceasefire*, launched by the Boston Police Department

in 1996. In the late 1980s Boston Massachusetts experienced an epidemic of gang-related firearms homicides in two poor, inner-city neighbourhoods. Between 1987 and 1990 gang-related murders rose from 22 per annum to 73. From then until 1995 they averaged 44 a year.

*Operation Ceasefire* brought together practitioners, researchers and local people, including gang members, in the two neighbourhoods to map the youth homicide problem. Recognising the suspicion and hostility that many local people felt towards the police, prior to launching the intervention, officers spent months working with local people to improve local services and enhance youth provision. They then proceeded to implement what David Kennedy (2007) describes as a 'focused deterrence strategy, harnessing a multitude of different agencies plus resources from within the community'. Ceasefire mapped the perpetrators and victims of violence and addressed them directly through call-ins where they were involved in face-to-face discussions with representatives of the local community, the police and welfare and educational agencies. The objective of *Operation Ceasefire* was simple enough – it aimed to save lives and reduce serious injury. It did not aim to 'smash' gangs, although defection from gangs was a side effect of the initiative.

*'This approach involved deterring chronic gang offenders' violence by reaching out directly to gangs, saying explicitly that violence would no longer be tolerated, and backing that message by pulling every lever legally available when violence occurred ... When gang violence occurred, a direct message (was sent) to gang members that they were under the microscope because of their violent behaviour.'*

Braga et al., 2018

While the programme threatened prosecution and imprisonment for perpetrators, it also offered the realistic prospect of alternative futures, through education, training, employment and counselling provided by members of the partnership if children desisted from their involvement in violence and drug dealing.

An analysis of the impact of *Operation Ceasefire* by the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, which began in 1996, concluded that the programme had been responsible for a fall in youth homicides from an average of 44 per annum between 1991 and 1995 to 26 in 1996 and 15 in 1997; a downward trend which continued until 1999 (Braga, 2001). The Ceasefire model was subsequently adopted in Manchester and Glasgow.

## **Interventions**

A Premier League football club in London runs a broad range of projects for children in trouble and in need. Children find involvement attractive because participation is voluntary and because the club is neither a criminal justice nor a welfare agency and it offers a broad range of sporting, artistic and vocational programmes. Also, if necessary, it will keep contact with children for 'as long as it takes'. It also offers individual and group mentoring programmes to which children are referred by social welfare and criminal justice agencies but, again, participation is voluntary.

The club's project head sits on the borough's Serious Youth Violence Board, a multi-agency group including the police, relevant statutory agencies and some voluntary sector organisations. The Board monitors gang activity in the borough and the links between street gangs, organised crime groups and County Lines. It identifies 'hotspots' of violent conflict where gangs are using children and younger adolescents to transport drugs to out-of-town



locations. This enables the project to target its outreach and neighbourhood work in the borough. The Head of the club's Outreach Programme said:

*"We now have programmes which meet young people who are just on the edge of getting (gang) involved; maybe they've been arrested for gang-related activities and we're meeting others who are involved and would like a way to get out but can't really see it. These programmes are putting us right in the heart of the gang problem."*

Importantly, the project grows its own staff, by recruiting and then training local children who have passed through its programmes. This increases the likelihood of what Mike Seal and Peter Harris (2016) call 'reciprocal identification'.

Wilf was referred for individual counselling by his probation officer who suspected that he was involved in County Lines. His worker at the club, Enzo, who was once a participant in a similar programme had, as he said, 'been around the block a few times' before he was recruited by the club and supported through his youth work training and university degree. Wilf said:

*"I didn't think anyone would be able to like talk me off getting off the roads or anything like that. But when I met Enzo and then started talking, it was just like, he knew everything about me and when you've got someone to support you and influence you like that, it's different to trying to do it all by yourself and being on the road. When I first met E I was feeling so shit about myself. I reckon if I didn't meet Enzo. I'd probably be in prison or like in a gang or killed or stabbed up or something. Because when I first met Enzo I was feeling like 'I need money', ... and I would do some bad things to get money ... And he was calling me, it wasn't like I had to call him, he was calling me, 'Are we meeting today?' Yes, say if I was like five minutes late, 'Why are you not here, what are you doing?' So it was kind of like a dad kind of thing. Yes, it was good. He's on the ball. He made a big commitment to me."*

Barter et al., 2020

### 3. Conclusion

At present, responses to the criminal exploitation of children involved in County Lines is, all too often, patchy and poorly coordinated. The Home Office Violence and Vulnerability Unit (VU; 2018) reports that children arrested for possession with intent to supply and released back home are seldom 'picked up' by children's services' duty teams, even though they may have a 'drug debt'. Research undertaken by Firmin and Lloyd (2020) suggests that:

*'... despite being at risk of significant harm, young people abused in community or peer, rather than familial, settings will most likely receive a 'no further action' decision from social workers following referrals for support.'*

The VU report observes that current interpretations of Child Protection Policy prevent workers accepting cases on the sole basis of 'debt enslavement' and entrapment, and that thresholds for intervention are too high. However, a further limitation to effective one-to-one intervention is the variability of inter-agency information flow. The importance of sharing and reviewing all available information is clearly set out in the following case example.

#### Case example

In 2019 Jaden Moodie, 14, was knocked off a moped in Leyton, East London, and stabbed to death by a group of attackers in an apparent gang dispute. Three months earlier, he was arrested for possession of crack cocaine and money in a 'cuckooed' flat in Bournemouth, more than 100 miles from his home. Jaden's mother had removed him from mainstream education in Nottingham when he was 12 after a series of incidents, including one in which he was said to have threatened to stab another boy and shoot him with an airgun. Nottinghamshire police failed to share information about this and another alleged firearm threat with the relevant agencies. In April 2018 Jaden and his siblings were sent to stay with his grandmother in Waltham Forest after threats were made because of drug debts he was said to have built up.

The Appropriate Adult who attended Jaden's police interview in Bournemouth felt Jaden was a vulnerable child frightened that he was being groomed and coerced by others. John Drew, Chair of the Serious Case Review, said:

*"Had it been possible for [Jaden] to have met specialist child exploitation workers while in custody, and brought back to London by [them], and ideally if they could have continued to work with him, I believe such workers would have been able to exploit the 'reachable moment' of his crisis."*

The review found that although his grandmother told 'early help' social workers, involved with Jaden on his return from Bournemouth, that selling drugs was a consequence of his drug debt bondage, they did not discuss this with him. The review also noted that although Waltham Forest's housing services were aware of threats to Jaden in Nottingham, this information did not feature in discussions about intervention. The report notes that:

*'There appears to have been a compelling case for bringing together, under strong leadership, all those who had information and insight to contribute to developing a unified response to Child C's vulnerability.'*

However, even though such 'rescue and response' arrangements for criminally exploited children had since been implemented on a pan-London basis, both Bournemouth's youth offending service and Waltham Forest's duty team remained unaware of them at the time the review was conducted.

The pan London, multi-agency, service highlighted in the case example aims to ensure that all children and vulnerable people identified as being exploited through County Lines are known and protected through local safeguarding channels and to identify those responsible for running County Lines and exploiting vulnerable people to aid in bringing them to justice. All the responses highlighted in this paper stress the importance of such multi-agency approaches – criminal justice, welfare and educational agencies – with a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities and a focus on information sharing. The importance of engaging local communities is also clear, maximising credibility and capacity through the use of local resources and interventions and through the integration of community members, particularly gang-involved and gang-affected children.

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