

Covid-19 Research: Home Affairs Select Committee call for evidence: Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (Coronavirus)

Written submission from the Rights Lab, University of Nottingham¹

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[Responding to the 14th of January 2021 supplementary call for evidence on the Home Office's ongoing response to the pandemic](#), this submission focuses on **Child Criminal Exploitation** and **County Lines Drug Supply**, and their intersection with **online harms**, during COVID-19. It is based on our ongoing research project '[COVID-19 and Child Criminal Exploitation: Closing Urgent Knowledge and Data Gaps on the Implications of Pandemic for County Lines](#),' funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of UK Research and Innovation. Interim findings² indicate that the pandemic has had a significant impact on young people's exposure to online harm, criminal exploitation through the drug supply, and the policing response to County Lines.

Background

1. As early as March 2020, media reports were suggesting that the UK's lockdown measures were having a significant impact on the nature of County Lines drug supply, the vulnerability and criminal exploitation of young people, and the efforts of youth and social care to safeguard and support young people at risk of, or involved in, County Lines.
2. Because of school closures and general reductions in movement, travel and physical/social interaction, social media has become, for many young people, the primary form of social interaction with peers. Law enforcement, social care and safeguarding practitioners interviewed through our research have expressed significant concerns at young people's engagement with online content that glorifies and promotes gang involvement and drug-related wealth. This exposes them to risks of peer influence and early-stage grooming, leading to their exploitation through County Lines drug networks.

Recommendations

For Law enforcement:

3. **Concerted and coordinated data-collection is needed to better understand patterns of exploitation.** Currently, better recording and use of data by police and statutory bodies would assist in developing knowledge about the precise impact of social media in the exploitation of young people, and its wider role in perpetuating crime and violence linked to County Lines. Additional analytical resources for police are needed to facilitate this. Territorial police should also further develop their relationships with local partners to enhance intelligence gathering.

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² Ben Brewster et al., "The Impact of COVID19 on Child Criminal Exploitation - Interim Research Briefing November 2020," *Rights Lab Research Briefing*, 2020, <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2020/november/briefing-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-child-criminal-exploitation.pdf>.

4. **More attention should be given to how drug-related imagery is used to lure and attract young people into County Lines, and its wider role in perpetuating gang activity and violence**, paying close attention to nuance in the use of specific platforms, such as Snapchat and Instagram. There are growing concerns around the use of social media as a recruitment strategy, and **proactive tracking of social media could be used by police to establish an understanding of these issues and could also help to identify territorial tensions linked to County Lines drug supply.**
5. **Where possible, territorial police should develop their relationships with partners to enhance intelligence gathering** and work to ensure suitable referral and local support provisions are in place for young people who are identified as victims of criminal exploitation. Those in strategic roles have reported success in engaging with stakeholders over information sharing practices, but it must be ensured that these are systematic to enable increased detection of County Lines, and a better understanding of all aspects of exploitation that would assist safeguarding efforts.

For the UK Government:

6. While there is notable recognition in the governments 'Online Harms' White Paper³ of grooming for the purposes of Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, there is no direct acknowledgement of similar practices in relation to criminal exploitation. The report does recognise the use of social media in promoting gang culture – and the potential contribution of this to knife crime. **Given the profile and prevalence of Child Criminal Exploitation and County Lines, explicit recognition that these issues are fuelled by online harms is essential.**
7. Terminology such as 'grooming' and 'recruitment' may not reflect the subtleties of the peer influence and the methods used to involve and criminally exploit young people through County Lines drug supply. **More work is needed to fully understand how the portrayal of wealth derived from drug supply, and the culture associated with gang life contribute to the exploitation of young people, even if the content associated with these processes is itself not illegal.** Proactive work by police and partners to improve understanding of social media use could provide vital insights that improve both criminal justice and safeguarding outcomes.
8. Criminal exploitation takes places on a continuum. Young people that are exploited through drug supply may themselves contribute to the promotion of the lifestyle and may be conditioned (groomed) into offenders that are partially or fully complicit. Others may be compelled through outside circumstances. **We recommend it be explicitly acknowledged that young people, regardless of their position on the continuum of exploitation, are considered to be victims of Child Criminal Exploitation, in order to avoid wrongful prosecution.**

The nature and prevalence of online harms during Covid-19

9. School closures and general reductions in movement, travel and physical social interaction have meant that young people are spending increasing amounts of time online. Social media has become, for many, the primary form of social interaction with peers.
10. Alongside this, our research indicates that children and young people are increasingly entering into criminal exploitation and County Lines drug supply through social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram. Through ongoing data collection with frontline professionals, we have continued to receive reports that perpetrators are increasingly using social media to plan and facilitate drug distribution, by seeking the assistance of young people on Snapchat and other social media platforms. Once transit routes are in place, social media is also being used as a means to locate, contact and exploit drug runners in the drug market area.

³ See for example UK Home Office, "Online Harms White Paper," *Home Office & Department for Digital Culture Media and Sport*, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper/online-harms-white-paper>.

11. There are increasing concerns of a rise in 'mate exploitation', facilitated through social media platforms. This alludes to County Lines perpetrators grooming young people and encouraging them to refer their friends as potential drug runners. This is a form of extended peer-influence.
12. Similarly, online gaming forums are also being used by criminal gangs as a method of advertising drug-related work to young people, with young people being befriended and groomed through the games' chat function.
13. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat are used to display drug-related wealth and imagery that seeks to glamourise involvement - and encourage young people to participate in County Lines.
14. We have also received reports that certain mobile apps are being used by gangs to surveil and control exploited young people. Perpetrators are using smartphone apps with GPS and 'share my location' features to track the location of criminally exploited young people involved in drug supply, to ensure their participation in the network and monitor productivity levels. While use of these tools has been documented previously⁴, there are fears that they have increased in prevalence during the pandemic as alternative means of maintaining control over runners became more difficult to implement.
15. There are significant knowledge gaps on a national level among law enforcement/frontline professionals with regard to the use of social media and how young people are attracted/recruited into criminality. While there is awareness that it is increasingly a prominent element of gang related activity, and criminal exploitation, the methods of contact, the imagery and content used, and the subtleties of peer-influence are lesser understood.
16. There is recognition from practitioners that COVID-19 had significantly inhibited detection and safeguarding. However, the number of child referrals to the National Referral Mechanism in the first half of 2020 was similar to 2019, with unexplained quarterly fluctuations,⁵ indicating that County Lines criminal exploitation had sustained, responding to the continued demand for class A drugs.
17. Access to young people with existing links to County Lines, or considered vulnerable to developing such links, has been inhibited during periods where lockdown restrictions were in place. Restrictions have prevented opportunities for face-to-face safeguarding, care and risk assessment. This has further fuelled concerns over online harms and grooming while young people were confined to their homes, also exacerbating practitioners' abilities to accurately risk assess.
18. Other factors, including school closures - and the potential to be separated from friends and family for long periods of time - were reported to have contributed to feelings of isolation, and in some cases, increased the potential for substance misuse, further raising concerns about exploitation risk. Increased exposure to domestic violence at home is a risk factor that might push people towards exploitation by criminals. The 'postcode lottery' of service provision was also exacerbated during the pandemic as child protection and other services were disrupted - compounding risk in some areas.⁶

⁴ Simon Harding, *County Lines: Exploitation and Drug Dealing Among Urban Street Gangs, County Lines* (Bristol University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv114c782>.

⁵ UK Home Office, "Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics UK, Quarter 2 2020 – April to June," 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-quarter-2-2020-april-to-june>.

⁶ Elaine Wedlock and Julian Melina, "Sowing the Seeds: Children's Experience of Domestic Abuse and Criminality," *Victims Commissioner*, 2020, <https://victimscommissioner.org.uk/>.