



THE SCALE OF THE ISSUE

46,000 children in England are thought to be involved in criminal groups but that there are likely to be many more.

The Children's Society estimates that in London alone, **4,000 TEENAGERS** are being criminally exploited.



In last year's NRM figures, there were:

2,661 county lines referrals in Greater London,
842 in West Midlands and
549 in Greater Manchester.



Having said that, county lines gangs exist throughout the UK.

While young people **AGED 14-17**



are most likely to be recruited by county lines gangs, there are reports of children as young as seven being groomed.

In Dame Carol Black's 2020 independent review of drugs, she observed that "the trends in young people becoming involved in drug supply, drug consumption and in serious violence have occurred against a backdrop of increasing numbers of children in care and children in need, falling local government budgets, cuts to young people's services and increasing child poverty.

"Another key factor appears to be the rapid increase in permanent exclusions from school over the past five years. There is clear evidence that those young people, disproportionately young black men, drawn into county lines and related activity are much more likely than other young people to have been affected by adverse experiences such as neglect, substance misuse problems in the family, domestic violence, poor mental health, and exclusion from school."

A breeding and training ground for recruiters

As Black observes, there is a strong link between children outside mainstream education and county lines. According to the Home Office, "gangs wishing to exploit young people target them in arenas where they are likely to have reduced monitoring and supervision such as Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and Children's Homes."

It explains that "the exclusion of vulnerable young people from full time school, whether placing them on reduced timetables, putting in place home schooling arrangements, or removing them to PRUs exacerbates their vulnerability and increases the risk of being targeted by gangs for exploitation.

"In some areas, PRUs become the arena for gang rivalries which become dangerous for pupils and hard for staff to manage. PRUs are also viewed as the place where already vulnerable young people get first-hand exposure to and experience of crime (drug dealing / violence / intimidation/ recruitment for 'county lines'). There are growing numbers of excluded children in alternative provision and this clustering together is creating a recruiting arena for crime and anti-social behaviour."



DIG DEEPER

County lines gangs target children from any background but they usually seek out young people who are marginalised or vulnerable in some way.

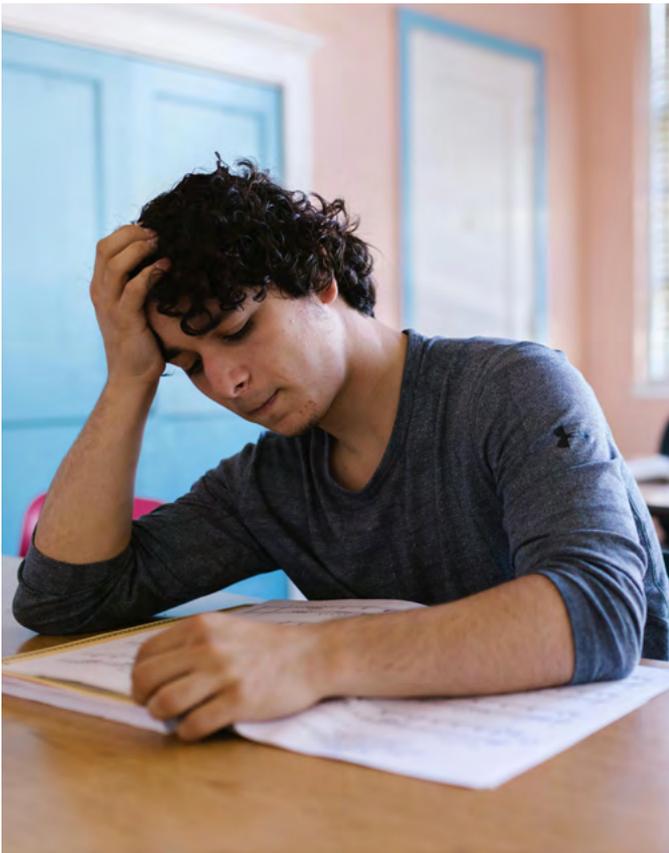
Most county lines victims have **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)** - stressful or traumatic events that occur in childhood such as verbal abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, domestic violence, substance abuse or mental illness in the family, loss of a parent or an incarcerated family member. In fact, in 2017, an American study found that children who experienced a combination of ACEs were more at risk of becoming a victim of human trafficking.¹

1. Reid, J.A. et al. (2017) 'Human Trafficking of Minors and Childhood Adversity in Florida', American Journal of Public Health, 107(2), pp. 306-311

Sometimes children deliberately get excluded from school in order to get allocated to a PRU so they can recruit more pupils into selling drugs. At other times, gang members wait outside PRU gates on the lookout for the most vulnerable children to target.

In terms of ethnicity, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) observed that for all regions (except London) the greatest proportion of individuals involved in county lines are of white ethnicity. However, in all regions, individuals of black ethnicity, where recorded, are over-represented in comparison to the regional population data.

Most victims feel they have a 'lack of options' and grow up in a pressure cooker environment. They are often 'born' into a world of serious organised crime. Against this backdrop, it is vital that communities work together to intervene earlier and break the cycle of poverty, abuse and exploitation.



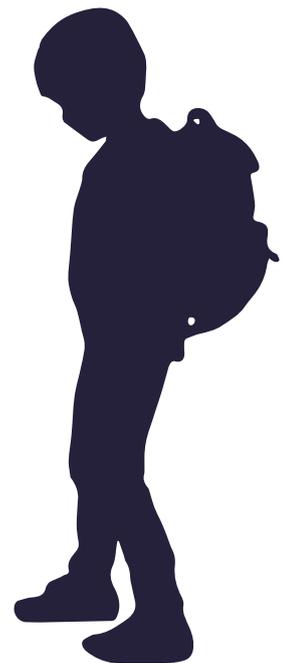
WATCH THE FILM

Leo Powell, a county lines educator, shares his experience of getting alongside vulnerable young people.



<https://youtu.be/7V0-sfc4ngw>

1. What struck you as you watched the film?
2. How can churches play a part in preventing vulnerable children from getting targeted by county lines' gangs?
3. What warning signs did you learn about that teachers or youth workers can look out for?
4. Who could you develop a mentoring relationship with? What themes could you bring to a mentoring relationship to deepen trust and help young people navigate the challenges of adolescence?
5. How can children also play a part in looking out for their friends?





READ LUKE 18 V 31-34

Jesus tells his disciples about the way of the cross – a journey involving challenge, conflict and opposition. Yet on the third day he will rise again. This is the mystery of Easter for which we prepare in Lent.

By predicting the nature of his final days, Jesus demonstrates once and for all that he is in total control of his destiny. While Jesus' crucifixion looks like pointless suffering and a meaningless death, it is, in fact, the hope for all people and communities. Wonderfully, death and evil do not have the final word. Jesus predicts he will rise again and on Easter Sunday, we see this prophecy fulfilled, in all its glory.

At one level, such a message seems beyond every possibility we can see and measure. But Jesus's life gives us hope about the ultimate triumph of good over evil.

- How can this hope drive our prayers and actions as we engage with those facing evil and abuse today?

The disciples did not understand or believe what Jesus was saying about his death.

- How can we try to listen and understand when people are telling us their own stories of struggle?
- How can our churches be places that help people find their own 'rise' after abuse, accompanied by our love and support?
- How can we hold out the hope of Easter to families and young people who are struggling in our communities?



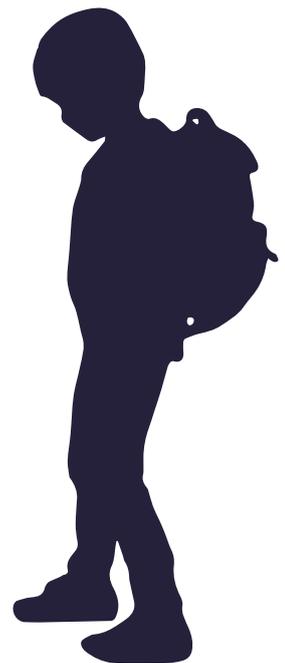
PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

We praise you for the mystery of the cross. We praise you for sending your son to suffer and die for us. We praise you that death and the devil did not get the final word and that Jesus rose again. Help us to hold out this hope to those who are suffering in our communities.

In Jesus' name,

Amen





A STORY OF HOPE – LEO’S STORY

In 2010, Leo began attending a church in London, where he became a Christian and soon got involved in the youth work. He eventually stepped into the role of full-time Youth Pastor, spending the next decade mentoring and supporting the young people in the congregation. Afterwards, he worked as a Behaviour Mentor in a school and took on a mentoring position at HMYOI Feltham. He later returned to education as Head of Year at a large college in Enfield which led him to become a county lines educator, delivering assemblies and talks in primary and secondary schools and colleges, and offering county lines training to teachers, parents, and practitioners.

Having worked with young people in gang-affiliated environments, particularly those in the criminal justice system, Leo has first-hand knowledge of the dangers and consequences of being involved in County Lines activities. He has also extensively researched the subject, drawing on the expertise of experienced practitioners in the field of gangs, County Lines, and child criminal exploitation.

He explains: “The kids in your church are not in a bubble. They live in the communities that we grew up in and they’re going through the same experiences that we went through, or even worse. They’re in our local schools and working our local streets. Kids are growing up in dysfunctional homes and from deprived backgrounds.

“We’ve got to really get to know the families in our churches and understand their issues and what they’re facing so that when they come to church on a Sunday, they know the genuine heart you have for them.

“In our prisons, there are a lot of kids from different backgrounds - from care homes, single parent homes, from the street. Often choices have been taken away from them and they have a lack of opportunities.



“I remember a 16-year-old boy I was working with in prison and he used to be a footballer. He was reflecting on his past and he said to me: “I wish I could go back to when I was 13” and I knew what he meant. At that stage in his life, something got taken away from him. He could have been a footballer, but he had no transportation to get to the ground every Sunday. His mum never had a car or transportation for him. No one was there to pick him up and take him to football on a Sunday. The only option he felt he had was to get involved in his local gang in the area that he grew up. I felt sorry for him because he didn’t want to be in prison. He didn’t want to be there but he got caught up in this pressure cooker, an environment where he got consumed. A simple gesture of driving him to football on a Sunday, that a community could have provided, could have potentially prevented so much heartache.”

Another facet of Leo’s work is his filmmaking. Leo uses his creative, storytelling skills to capture the struggles and experiences of young people on film and convey them in a way that resonates with audiences.



www.leopowell.co.uk



ACTION – BOLD INITIATIVES

1. Leo challenges the church to think radically about the role it can play in building community.
 - How can your church use its resources – its buildings, money, people - to affect change?
 - How outward looking is your church? Do you know the children in your community and the gaps in terms of youth groups / support provision?
2. Do you have connections with local schools? Could you encourage teachers you know to organise a county lines lesson or assembly?
3. Do you have a youthworker at your church? How aware are they of county lines? Could they host a county lines session for the young people they minister to?

The Clewer Initiative has created County Lines lesson plans for children aged 4 to 18. Take a look at them and consider forwarding to teachers and youthworkers that you know.



www.clewer.org.uk/resources/county-lines-lesson-plans-for-schools

The Clewer Initiative has recently pioneered a new badge with the Girls' Brigade called "Respectful Communities". The vision behind the series of new badges (Respectful Communities, Respectful Relationships and Speaking Up) is that they will help equip girls and young women to live compassionately and thoughtfully in the world around them. The Respectful Communities badge is designed for girls, aged 4-18 and introduces concepts of community safety, injustice and valuing fellow humans. It helps young people understand potential warning signs of harm and abuse and know to do if they see or experience something that makes them feel uncomfortable. Why not get in touch with your local Girls' Brigade group and encourage them to do the badge this year?

