



THE SCALE OF THE ISSUE

An estimated

27,000 children in England identified as a gang member (Children's Commissioner, 2019)

In total,

1,845 COUNTY LINES REFERRALS

were flagged through the National Referral Mechanism in 2024, accounting for 10 per cent of all referrals received. Three quarters of these referrals were boys. However, NRM referrals are just the tip of the iceberg.

The Home Office estimates that approximately



14,500

children were at risk or involved in child criminal exploitation in 2023/24 (this is also likely to be a significant underestimate)

In 2023-24, **6,644 COUNTY LINES**

were recorded by National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). This number was 4,007 in 2022-23.

There were

1,447 ORGANISED CRIME GROUPS

(OCGs) linked to County Lines and these were overwhelmingly recorded as British (91.3%).



According to the NPCC, county lines is becoming more localised, with fewer lines running outside force boundaries.



DIG DEEPER

County lines is a form of criminal exploitation where urban gangs befriend, persuade, coerce, manipulate or force children and young people, either online or offline, to get involved with drug dealing, often storing or transporting drugs. The 'lines' refer to mobile phones that are used to control a young person who is delivering drugs.

County lines gangs are organised criminal networks that are constantly refining their operations to avoid detection resulting in the signs of exploitation changing and becoming increasingly subtle.

According to the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), county lines is becoming more localised, with fewer lines running outside force boundaries.

Crack cocaine and heroin continue to dominate the County Lines market though the selling of powerful synthetic opioids such as nitazenes has also increased.

WHY AND HOW DO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE GET DRAWN INTO COUNTY LINES?

The criminals behind county lines are ruthless but organised gangs. They use sophisticated techniques to coerce children and shocking levels of violence to keep them compliant.

In broad terms, young people are **targeted** and chosen - the exploiter usually seeks out those that are marginalised and vulnerable. They will observe their chosen victim to understand their vulnerabilities, needs and wants and then work to gain and build the young person's trust.

Many of the children and young people who are **targeted** share similar characteristics including a lack of attainment in education; limited employment or financial opportunities; a difficult or traumatic upbringing (sometimes known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)); a lack of agency or opportunity to make choices in society.

County lines gangs exploit these dynamics and rather than immediately using threats, gangs ‘groom’ children and young people into county lines by building trust, creating a sense of belonging, friendship and family and by displaying their wealth (high-end cars, expensive clothing) as a sign of the ‘benefits’ of county lines involvement.

Once recruited to a county lines gang, the control escalates to **coercion**, often involving threats or actual violence. The aim is to trap the person so they feel they have “no reasonable alternative” but to comply with criminal demands.

County lines gangs often stage a robbery as a tactic to get young people into **debt bondage**. They ask an individual to look after drugs or cash but then they steal the items themselves and demand repayment through labour. Alternatively, some young people are given drugs for “free” or on credit (“on tick”) but once addicted or unable to pay, they must work to repay the debt. Gangs rarely release control even when the supposed debt is paid off.

Physical and mental abuse are common, along with threats of violence or death to their family members if they try to leave the gang. Gang leaders and members often live near one another, and home addresses are known and used as leverage. Gangs cultivate reputations for extreme violence or murder and believe that harm will occur to them or their family members if they refuse to comply.



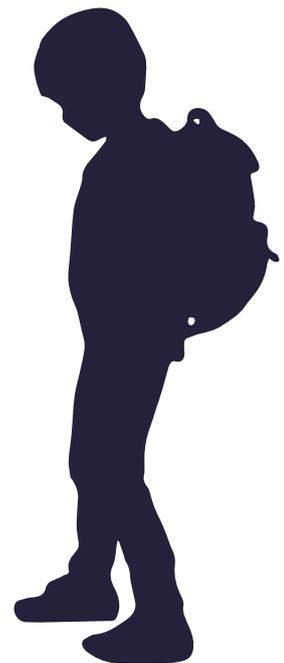
WATCH THE FILM

County line educators, Sabrina Hewitt and Careena Thompson, explain more about how county lines gangs target vulnerable young people.



<https://youtu.be/pwsEZByCoM>

1. What struck you as you watched the film?
2. What sort of children might get targeted by county lines gangs?
3. How does the grooming process work?
4. What do you think parents need to bear in mind as they think about getting alongside their children and encouraging open conversation?





READ LUKE 18 V 18-30

How hard it is for all of us who are comfortable, like the ruler in the story, to enter the kingdom of God. We tend to prioritise our own security and comfort, before reaching out to others. To think and act differently might seem as difficult as trying to put a camel through the eye of a needle. Imagine a child having a large needle and trying to squeeze a toy camel through the eye – its simply impossible!

Jesus is using hyperbole to highlight just how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. The disciples are astonished and ask, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus’ words go against their natural assumptions. They might have seen the wealth of the rich man as a sign that he is blessed by God and therefore likely to enter the kingdom of God. But it is just the opposite. The trappings of wealth can make it very difficult for someone to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, the greatest commandment in the law. What’s more, the distraction of riches can blind us to the needs of others and stop us from loving our neighbours as the Lord would like.

However, nothing is impossible with God. Even a rich man can be saved through the power of God! And what’s more, for anyone who leaves their home or family for the sake of God’s kingdom and takes the costly path of discipleship, Jesus promises they will receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come!



REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- How do Jesus’ words in this story surprise you?
- What encouragement is there in the passage for those who are finding following Jesus costly?
- What challenge is there in the passage for those who have material wealth and comfort?
- Do you, like the ruler, place limits on your discipleship? Are there things that you are unwilling to do when it comes to loving your neighbour?



PRAYER

Lord of all life, teach us to be honest about what our characters might lack, so that with your light we may better identify the needs of your children. Help us to adjust our attitudes and actions in a way that thinks about others. Thank you that what might seem to be impossible for mortals is always possible for you.

Guide and guard to be better agents of your saving love in Jesus’ name we pray,

Amen.



A STORY OF HOPE – EQUIPPING YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR PARENTS TO RESIST COUNTY LINES

Sabrina was criminally exploited from a very young age but now works as a county lines educator, helping young people, parents and teachers understand more fully the dynamics around county lines, exploitation, grooming and coercive control. She is passionate about raising awareness around child criminal and sexual exploitation and draws on her personal experiences to provide training, advice and guidance to a wide range of professionals and organisations who work with children and young people.

She is particularly troubled by the misconceptions and myths that sometimes surround county lines and exploitation. For example, the belief that sexual exploitation only affects girls and criminal exploitation only affects boys. This just isn't the case – there is much more complexity and crossover.

Similarly, Sabrina wishes there was much more understanding of the victim perpetrator cycle and how some victims move from being targeted to targeting others. They 'do what they know' and in this way, exploitation gets embedded even deeper in communities.

Over the last nine years, Sabrina has worked directly with young people and families who have been involved in or affected by exploitation and county lines. Sabrina has put in place numerous interventions including 1:1 mentoring to protect young people from further involvement in crime and exploitation.

She has seen firsthand the impact county lines has on parents and siblings and how few parents are equipped to identify the signs of exploitation, respond appropriately and seek help. She sees early intervention and the educating and empowering of children AND parents as critical to breaking the cycle of exploitation.

Sabrina (and her team) run training workshops for vulnerable young people and their families. She explains: "We always put the young person at the forefront of our workshops - it's not a session for parents or teachers. It is wholly aimed at the young person. We try to create a safe space and discuss topics they wouldn't normally talk about with the adults in their life.

"We facilitate the workshop in a way where everyone gets heard. If people don't want to speak, we don't force anyone. It's quite relaxed and chilled but also an opportunity to share our own personal experiences. Our stories nicely underline the things we are saying to them.

"It's a bit of a balancing act. Trying to communicate certain truths about county lines and exploitation as well as giving them the knowledge and the voice to know they can say no and challenge other people's decisions if they feel they are not benefiting them.

"We try to teach parents how to be patient and calm because the information they're going to hear from their child won't be nice and might break their heart, but they need to keep their cool. Because as soon as a parent gets scared, the child also draws back thinking "I've seen how much this has frightened mum. I don't want to put her through that."



www.sabrinahewitt.com

Sabrina has also written three books telling the stories of three different characters – Aisha, Kyle and Darnell. The first one describes a 14-year-old's descent into county lines. The second book focuses on the exploiter in the first book and how he became a perpetrator. The third book concentrates on the perpetrator's younger sister and how his decisions affected her future. Sabrina has also written workshops around the books as well as a parents' handbook on grooming and exploitation and some colouring books for younger children.

You can find out more through Trapline Legacy's Instagram or LinkedIn: <https://www.instagram.com/traplinelegacy/>

Or purchase one of her books for young people or guides for parents and carers here: [Amazon.co.uk: Sabrina Hewitt: books, biography, latest update.](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Sabrina-Hewitt-books-biography-latest-update/)



ACTION – TRAINING

A central part of The Clewer Initiative's mission is to provide training for individuals, churches and community groups. Our hope is that through providing up-to-date and relevant training, people will grow in their awareness of modern slavery, confidence to spot the signs and know what to do with any suspicions.

We have several training courses on county lines, written for different audiences. Our Breaking County Lines training is designed to enable churches and communities to understand county lines better and look at ways of building resilience in communities, so county lines can't get a foothold.

We also run Train the Trainer courses for those who want to take the Breaking County Lines course out to their own communities as well as county lines training for foster parents, teachers, parents, grandparents and guardians. More recently, we have developed county lines lesson plans for schools.

For more information, visit <https://clewer.org.uk/training-and-events>



THE COUNTY LINES PSALM

*The gang leader is my shepherd,
I shall not ask.*

*He makes me lie down in unheated flats;
He leads me beside needle-strewn stairwells;*

He enslaves my soul.

*He leads me down windswept streets
For his own profit.*

*As I walk down the darkest alley, I feel evil;
For he is with me;*

*My phone and my stash, they cling to me.
He prepares every deal for me in the presence of
my enemies;*

*My head it drips with sweat;
My water bottle is empty.*

Surely ruthlessness and cruelty shall stalk me

All the days of my life,

And I shall live in an unfurnished home

My whole short life.

*Rt Revd Simon Burton-Jones,
the Bishop of Tonbridge*

