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# Signs and indicators of county lines and criminal exploitation

## Report Overview

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This article presents a few key pieces of advice from Community Care Inform Children's guide: **'Responding to criminal exploitation and county lines'**. The full guide explores how county lines operate, the signs and indicators of county lines and criminal exploitation, the Modern Slavery Act and practice tips for working with the whole family when a child is being harmed. The guide also provides information on multi-agency working and assessing wider vulnerabilities and risk factors. Community Care Inform Children subscribers can [access the full guide here](#).

The guide was written by James Houghton, a trainer and consultant on extra-familial harm and exploitation at Future Voices. He is also safeguarding operational lead for the British Transport Police's county lines task force.

Unfortunately, there are many ways in which a child can be criminally exploited, for example, through businesses, cannabis factories, stealing cars to order or pyramid schemes. This article focuses on county lines.







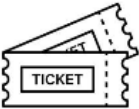


Photo: Sabphoto/Adobe Stock

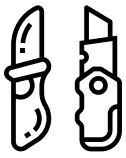
## What are county lines?

“The term ‘county lines’ is used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of ‘deal line’. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.” ([Home Office, 2023](#)).

## Signs and indicators of county lines

There are various indicators of county lines that you can look out for. These may include:

<p><b>Phones</b></p> 	<p>Having multiple sim cards or mobile phones, and those phones frequently pinging or ringing (this could indicate dealers are checking on where the young person is and/or users responding to offers or ordering). The phones used will often be old style or basic phones, referred to as ‘burner phones’.</p>
<p><b>Drugs</b></p> 	<p>If a child has crack or heroin on them, even if only a small amount, it is appropriate to suspect county lines activity. It is rare for children themselves to be users of crack cocaine and heroin.</p>
<p><b>Paraphernalia</b></p> 	<p>This includes drug paraphernalia, lubricants or items to conceal drugs. Children may also be required to conceal drugs within their bodies, routinely in their anus or vagina, often referred to as ‘plugging’ or ‘packing’</p>
<p><b>Packaging</b></p> 	<p>This includes pill boxes, wrapping materials, or lottery tickets that drugs may be kept in. There may be ‘light’ and ‘dark’ papers (ie light = crack cocaine; dark = heroin) – this makes it easier to ensure quick supply of the correct substance.</p>
<p><b>Movement</b></p> 	<p>Be aware of children travelling distances, possibly having train tickets, keys or hotel passes, and/or going missing for several days at a time.</p>
<p><b>Money</b></p> 	<p>Having large amounts of money or bulging pockets. Give consideration to the user base – if supplying to street communities, they may pay in change, so you may hear jingling of coins or bulging pockets before it is exchanged into notes. Children may also be encouraged to use their bank accounts to hold illegal funds (money laundering).</p>
<p><b>Abduction</b></p> 	<p>There are incidents of adults or older children attending the addresses of children and taking them away to ‘work’, including from care.</p>
<p><b>Weapons</b></p>	<p>Children are routinely found in possession of weapons, particularly knives (eg hunting knives, machetes, swords)</p>



## Peers



In adolescence, age gaps between children can be significant. If a 10-year-old is 'friends' with a 14-year-old, who is friends with a 17-year-old, this may indicate a cause for concern if other factors are present.

## Presentation



The environments that children are in are unpleasant – there may be a detectable smell of neglected, damp property; they may have dirty or wet clothing, or dirty fingers due to either substances they have been in contact with or from dirt in the property. They may be wearing several pairs of trousers, either to keep warm or for something clean to sleep on; they may be well dressed but their hair is dirty/messy because they have not been able to wash. They may fall asleep as soon as they return home because they have been unable to while away.

## Nothing



You may see nothing. Groups and gangs are sophisticated in their methodology and avoiding detection is a key goal, so they may work with children and adults to ensure that behaviours are not observed. For example, communication may be all online and children may go missing at times when it's less noticeable, travel shorter distances or move drugs separately.

## Practice Point

- It's important to consider changes in the child's presentation and behaviour, however, only focusing on an 'event' or the specific child involved can result in insufficient attention being given to the family as a whole. Try to assess the wider vulnerabilities within the home.
- Families may experience unknown people coming to their address or being threatened, assaulted, indebted or their property being damaged and having to relocate. The parent of a regularly missing child will often spend considerable time trying to locate them, liaising with relevant authorities, while fearing their child being involved in a serious incident. This can impact on their availability to their other children, who will likely be confused and fearful about the frequent absence of their sibling.
- Sometimes siblings too have been drawn into exploitation and suffered physical, sexual and emotional harm. The whole family therefore needs to be assessed comprehensively, recognising the need for both prevention and protection for all family members, and detailing explicitly what 'support' means.

## Conclusion

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*The full guide to responding to criminal exploitation and county lines includes more information on how county lines operate, how grooming is used to recruit and exploit children, how to evidence harm and use a whole-family approach to practice. For more information on this article visit [www.communitycare.co.uk](http://www.communitycare.co.uk)*

