What is County Lines?

County Lines is a criminal practice that involves gangs sending children from cities into smaller towns and villages in order to sell drugs to the people living in these areas. It's called county lines because these children often travel from a big city to small towns in a different county, and they use dedicated mobile phone 'lines' in order to contact people for buying and selling drugs. The most common drugs involved in County Lines are typically heroin and cocaine, but other drugs (such as MDMA, amphetamines, cannabis and spice) are also sold. The activity of selling drugs in this way is sometimes referred to as 'going country', as it involves going from the city into the countryside.

Gangs recruit young people into doing the work for them because it means that the gang members themselves can manage the operation from a distance and are less likely to be detected by police.

It is estimated that at least 46,000 children in England alone are involved in criminal gang activity. In London alone, there are 4,000 young people who are being exploited to work for gangs in County Lines.

How do gangs recruit young people for County Lines?

There are several approaches that gangs might take in order to lure

young people into working for them. One approach is grooming, which is when children and young people are given attention, compliments, money, food or presents in order to build a relationship with a gang member. The young person being groomed is then made to feel like they owe something to the gang member, and this is how they are recruited into criminal activity. Gangs use social media to target individual young people online, although they do also approach young people in public places such as parks and shopping centres.

How do the gangs use violence and force?

As well as grooming, gangs sometimes use violence in order to threaten young people into working for them. Weapon s such as knives, firearms, bats and acid are used by gangs in order to force young people to carry drugs on trains and sell drugs to local drug dealers in smaller towns. Violence is also frequently used towards the young people once they start working for the gangs - for example, if any money or drugs go missing.

As part of their criminal operation, gangs also have a house in the local area which they use as a base for selling (and sometimes making) drugs. This is known as a 'trap house'. Sometimes, gangs will take over the house of a local person and force them into allowing the gang to use their house as a 'trap house', usually with either violence or the promise of free drugs. This is called 'cuckooing', as it involves taking over another person's home, like cuckoos do with other birds. Young people are sometimes expected to stay in trap houses when they are working for the gangs. This makes the young person extremely vulnerable to abuse, such as drug abuse, physical and even sexual abuse.

Who do gangs target for County Lines?

Gangs typically target young people aged between 12 and 17. They usually target young people who are considered to be vulnerable, for example homeless children, children living in care homes, children who have mental health issues, children living in extreme poverty, children with chaotic or broken family lives, or children who have been expelled from mainstream education. They also look for children who may be wanting protection, money, love, excitement, status or a sense of belonging, in order to exploit these feelings for their own criminal purposes.

What are the long-term consequences of County Lines?

County Lines criminal activity has a negative impact on the communities involved. It brings further violence, abuse and drugs into rural communities. By flooding the market with class A drugs, it increases social problems associated with drug use, for example anti-social behaviour, criminal damage and theft. As well as harming communities, County Lines activity has a negative impact on the individuals involved: if caught, drug dealers can face prison sentences of around nine years. Having a criminal record can then impact the individual's ability to gain particular types of

Employment in the future. For the young people involved, as well as the risk of criminal prosecution, there is also the risk of becoming a user of drugs, as well as becoming trapped in gang activity. While some young people see criminal gangs as an escape from their life of poverty and abuse, many find that they are trapped into a life of working for violent gangs which keep them in a cycle of poverty, abuse and intimidation.

How can I tell if someone is involved in County Lines and what can I do if I'm involved?

Some of the indicators that a child may be involved in County Lines activity are: staying out late; going missing for a few days; having drugs on them; having unexplained money, phones, jewellery or other items; becoming aggressive and using sexual, violent, or drug-related words all of a sudden; coming home looking bruised or in a bad state; having keys to unexplained places. If you are worried about you or someone you know being involved in County Lines, call Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

If you, or someone you know, are affected by any of the issues raised today, you can contact the following organisations for further help and guidance:

https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/drug-trafficking/county-lines

https://www.childline.org.uk/

https://crimestoppers-uk.org/about-the-charity/who-we-work-with/trusts-and-foundations/county-lines

https://www.fearless.org/en/campaigns/county-lines

The Crimestoppers hotline is anonymous – **0800 555 111**

Call **999** if you think there is an immediate danger.

Literacy through PSHE

Answer the following questions:

1. Who is more likely to be recruited into County Lines – adults or children?

2. What types of drugs are sold in County Lines?

3. How might gangs try to win the trust of a young person?

4. How many children in England are estimated to be involved in criminal gang activity?

5. Name THREE long-term consequences for someone who is involved in County Lines.

6. Name THREE signs that someone might be involved in County Lines.

7. What can you do if you need to get help for someone involved in County Lines?

Challenge Questions:

1. Why do you think that gangs use children to transport drugs for them? Think of THREE possible reasons.

2. In what ways does a child involved in County Lines face potential exploitation? Give THREE different examples.

3. What makes a young person vulnerable to being recruited into County Lines? Give the top THREE factors in your opinion and explain why you have chosen these factors as most important.

4. Do you think it is easy to help someone involved in County Lines? Why or why not? Explain your answer fully.