PARENT FACTSHEET – JUNE 2022

County lines: what you need to know

Children of all ages and backgrounds are at risk of being exploited by criminal gangs who'll use them to transport drugs and money around the country. Understand what county lines is and the signs to look out for.

What is county lines?

- A child is 'groomed' by a criminal gang, then exploited to transport drugs and money from one area (county) to another – usually from an urban location to a rural or coastal one. Grooming can happen in person, or online on social media apps like Snapchat
- The child may be trafficked to the gang's 'trap houses' or 'bandos' miles away from home, to find 'customers', deal with rival gangs and sell drugs
- The child is likely to face violence and sexual exploitation
- The 'lines' refer to the dedicated mobile phone lines that gangs use for selling drugs

Is my child at risk?

Criminal gangs are known to target:

- **Children with vulnerabilities**, such as poverty, family breakdown, exclusion from school – because they're more likely to respond to manipulation and coercion
- **Children from stable or affluent families** – because they're less likely to be known to the police and may blend in better in the town the gang sends them to
- **Girls and young children** – children as young as 7 are being groomed by gangs, and girls are often groomed into relationships with gang members or used to transport drugs as they're less likely to be stopped by the police

However, **any child is vulnerable to exploitation**.

What signs should I look out for?

Potential signs that a child is involved in county lines include:

- Leaving home without explanation
- Returning home late, staying out all night or going missing
- Being found in areas away from home
- Being secretive about who they're talking to and where they are going
- Persistently going missing from school or college
- Receiving unexplained money, phone(s), clothes or jewellery
- Receiving excessive texts/phone calls and/or owning multiple handsets

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- Forming relationships with controlling/older individuals or groups
- Using sexual, drug-related or violent language you wouldn't expect them to know
- Showing increasingly disruptive or aggressive behaviour
- Coming home with injuries or looking particularly messy
- Owning hotel cards or keys to unknown places
- Taking drugs, or being found with large amounts of drugs on them

Noticing any of these signs doesn't mean your child is being exploited through county lines. However, you should still talk to them about any concerns you have.

What should I do if I suspect my child is being exploited?

Talk to your child, stay calm and ask questions about what is going on, reassuring them you want to keep them safe. Try to be open, honest and non-judgemental – remember, they may be scared.

If you are still concerned, seek help straight away - there are organisations that can help you. You could do any of the following, **but you must tell someone**:

- Contact our school. Ask to speak to the **designated safeguarding lead** and explain your concerns to them. They will be able to advise you where to go next
- Report your concerns to children's social care. A social worker will be able to listen to your concerns and help you to protect your child
- Contact your local police station or call 101. If your child is missing, remember you don't have to wait 24 hours before making a report
- Contact organisations such as:
  - Crimestoppers: 0800 555 111
  - NSPCC: 0808 800 5000
  - Family Lives: 0808 800 2222

If you believe your child is in immediate danger, or a threat is made against you or another family member, **call 999 immediately**.

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Sources

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