

Exploring the Multi-Agency Approach to Policing County Lines.

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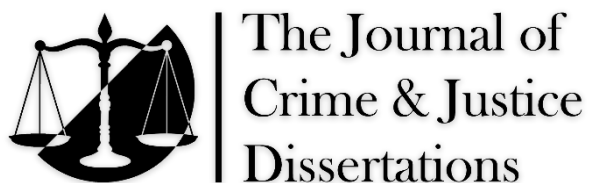
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Abstract

County lines is still an emerging phenomenon which is widespread across the whole of the United Kingdom (Pitts, 2020). Due to its geographical spread and the array of offences included within county lines it has been argued by many academics that a multi-agency response is the best way to tackle it (Burt et al., 2022). Therefore, this dissertation will explore county lines and the multi-agency approach to policing it using a library-based approach consisting of secondary analysis (McCartan and Robson, 2016). This dissertation will do so by exploring county lines, the scale and impact of this type of offending, particular multi-agency responses, the effectiveness of them and any rooms for improvement. The dissertation will conclude that although multi-agency work has led to a large number of county lines being shut down, these offending groups seem to learn from this and evolve to become better (O'Hagan and Edmundson, 2021). Therefore, county lines may never fully be eradicated.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Using existing data this dissertation will explore the multi-agency approach to policing county lines. It will do this by adopting a library-based approach consisting of secondary analysis, allowing the researcher to explore a wide range of both qualitative and quantitative sources to gain a richer and more balanced conception of county lines and the multi-agency approach to policing it (McCartan and Robson, 2016). This will be a significant piece of research because it will highlight what is effective when tackling the issue of county lines and what needs improving.

It is important to investigate county lines because it is a criminal activity which continues to spread and evolve. For example, in “2015 only seven of the UKs 44 police forces were reporting County Lines activity, by 2018 all 44 forces reported their presence” (Pitts, 2020, p5). It is a type of drug dealing which has gained popularity in recent years because offenders are less likely to gain attention from law enforcement and opposition from other dealers whilst also being able to gain financial benefits (Pitts, 2020). Additionally, it is a type of offending which is made up of multiple layers from child exploitation to serious violence and more in particular drug dealing (Burt et al., 2022). Therefore, it is also important to explore the multi-agency approach to policing county lines because of the scale and nature of the issue and how this response to tackling it is the most popular as it combines public, governmental and law enforcement agencies in the fight against county lines (Crawford and Jones, 1995).

Consequently, this dissertation explores county lines and the multi-agency response to policing it. To do so, this dissertation aims to define what the term coined county lines is, explore the impact of county lines, explore the multi-agency approach to policing county lines and to see how effective the multi-agency response to policing county lines is. To complete these aims, the second chapter of this dissertation will explore the methodology used focusing on a library-based approach and secondary analysis, any ethical and access issues and reflective research practice. The third chapter of this dissertation will explore the context of county lines focusing in on vulnerable people and grooming, the use of social media, cuckooing, plugging and debt bondage. The thirds chapter will explore the scale and impact of county lines on communities, victims, and offenders. The fourth chapter will explore the multi-agency response to county lines focusing on the maintenance of good relationships, Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs and mapping, the National County Lines Co-ordination Centre, and the British Transport Police County Lines Taskforce. The fifth chapter will explore the effectiveness of the multi-agency approach to policing county lines and any areas that can be improved. In the final chapter this

dissertation the researcher will provide a conclusion of this research project, making sure to highlight all the key findings. While this dissertation presents an effort to explore county lines policing, it is by no means exhaustive of all the multi-agency practices that may take place in the real world. However, aspects explored within this dissertation have been chosen due to relevancy and the researcher's want to explore in depth ideas instead of broadly giving readers a very brief picture of everything around this topic superficially.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The methodology section focuses on the library-based approach to research which consists of secondary analysis as well as ethical and access considerations for this research project. The research methodology used is of the ontological realism strand because it is concerned with what is academically available regarding the multi-agency approach to policing county lines (Jenkins, 2010). It is also valuable for the researcher to maintain a scientific attitude so that one can seek the truth, leading to the research being “carried out systematically, skeptically and ethically” (McCartan and Robson, 2016).

As established in the introduction, the research aims are:

1. To define what the term coined county lines is.
2. To explore the impact of county lines.
3. To explore the multi-agency approach to policing county lines.
4. To see how effective the multi-agency response to policing county lines is.

To achieve these objectives, in an ideal world, unstructured face-to-face interviews would have been used because they would allow the researcher to follow up on any responses which they may find interesting (McCartan and Robson, 2016). In turn, allowing the researcher to explore the multi-agency approach to policing county lines at a deeper level whilst giving the researcher the potential to produce new data. However, collecting “high quality, reliable, representative data is expensive and technically demanding” (Corti and Wathan, 2017, p490). Instead, a library-based approach has been adopted by acquiring and analysing secondary data.

Overall, the findings echoed the role of disability-based institutional discrimination in a school exclusion-to-youth offending pipeline in the UK. This is because before exclusion takes place, disability-based discrimination is done through lack of SEN identification and support hence unreasonable expectations and disciplining of SEN students.

2.2 Library-Based Approach & Secondary Analysis

A library-based approach consisting of secondary analysis took place to achieve the aims of this research. Secondary analysis is the analysis of sources or data that already exist around the topic at hand (Stewart, 1984). It uses secondary data which consist of sources of information or data that have been collected by someone other than the researcher and can “include government reports, industry studies, and syndicate information services as well as traditional books and journals found in libraries” (Stewart 1984, p11). Thus, secondary data can produce either qualitative or quantitative data. Qualitative data includes non-numerical information such as journal articles and interview transcripts whilst quantitative data includes numerical information such as statistics (Babbie, 2020). Combining both qualitative and quantitative data allows the researcher to have more of a post-positivist view, accepting that “theories, hypotheses, background knowledge and values of the researcher can influence what is observed” (McCartan and Robson, 2016, p22). Thus, meaning that the researcher is trying to seek a balanced conception by accepting no study on its own can establish it but if other related studies follow in the same way, then the conclusions become stronger (McCartan and Robson, 2016).

Using secondary analysis for this research project allows the research to be easily replicated because it is not taking place in a controlled setting such as a laboratory (McCartan and Robson, 2016). It also provides the researcher with massive amounts of data, especially as the researcher will not only be using hard copies but internet sources as well (Rasmussen, 2017). Yet, by using this method, the researcher can only explore what is already out there regarding the research topic instead of being able to go out and provide the researcher community with new innovative information (Stewart, 1984). However, saying this, it may lead to conclusions or new critical analysis which have not been suggested by “any one source” before (Stewart, 1984, p12). It is important to highlight that secondary data has been produced for a specific purpose which may unintentionally or deliberately produce bias. For example, government reports could have this effect. Therefore, it is essential that the researcher maintains a scientific attitude which incorporates healthy skepticism into the analysis and conclusion of the data they handle (Stewart, 1984).

Secondary data, for example statistics from the National Youth Agency, Office for National Statistics and the Government were beneficial for this piece of research because they showed just how big of a problem county line is becoming regarding geographical spread and how many people are involved. Also, journal articles from The British Journal of Criminology, Crime Prevention Studies & the Forensic Research as well as the Criminology International Journal were influential when trying to elaborate and

criticise arguments raised within this dissertation. Other sources were also significant for the research, the ones previously mentioned are just key examples of sources that were utilised and how the researcher did so. Therefore, a library-based approach involving secondary analysis was the most suitable method because it allowed the researcher to explore existent knowledge about the multi-agency approach to policing county lines (Rasmussen, 2017).

2.3 Ethical & Access Issues

The researcher has recognised the statement of ethics and therefore acknowledged that there is “no single model of ethical practice” but there:

“is a frame of reference to encourage and support reflective and responsible ethical practice in criminological research and, in keeping with the aims of the Society, challenge questionable practice, publishing or otherwise to promote principles, values and standards to ensure that ethical standards in criminological research are maintained” (British Society of Criminology, 2022).

It must be highlighted that ethics is an ongoing process throughout research not an endpoint (McCartan and Robson, 2016). Ethics can include many factors, from making sure all participants are kept safe and comfortable to not allowing any opposing views that the researcher may have to get in the way of the research at hand (Booth et al., 2003). The main ethical concerns at the heart of any type of research are anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent which all stem from the fundamental human right of confidentiality (Eynon et al., 2017). If all these ethical considerations are taken on board, then they “can serve the best interests of both researchers and their readers” (Booth et al., 2003, p275).

As previously mentioned, the researcher, in an ideal world would have chosen to use unstructured face-to-face interviews to complete this piece of research in order to follow up on any interesting points and gain a deeper understanding of the multi-agency approach to policing county lines (McCartan and Robson, 2016). However, the biggest ethical concern around this would be having access to participants because of the want to interview police officers and other agencies due to the research topic. To do such research, a gatekeeper is needed to allow the researcher to gain “access to the research environment” and control how much contact the researcher can or cannot have (McFadyen and Rankin, 2016, p82). Yet, due to the sensitivity of this group of participants and the small scale of this research project, there is not enough time to create this research in an ethical manner. Therefore, the researcher chose a library-based research approach instead consisting of secondary analyses because it allowed

them to delve deeper into readily available sources of information making this research less of an ethical concern.

2.4 Reflective Research Practice:

The researcher was able to find relevant sources of information easily because they had access to the internet as well as the library (Rasmussen, 2017). This being said, it was a struggle at times for the researcher to maintain healthy skepticism and a scientific attitude towards all forms of information, especially journals (Stewart, 1984). However, as the researcher identified this weakness early on, they were able to focus on maintaining a scientific view and thus produce new critical analysis and conclusions regarding county lines and the multi-agency approach to policing it which did not necessary exist before (Stewart, 1984).

Chapter 3: Context of Country Lines

3.1 Introduction

County lines is a significantly widespread issue across the United Kingdom with over 2,000 lines across the country, roughly 27,000 young and vulnerable people involved and over 90% of police forces reporting it to occur in their areas (National Youth Agency, 2021). It involves violence, drugs, safeguarding of young and vulnerable individuals, gangs, both sexual and criminal exploitation, missing persons, and modern slavery (Home Office, 2018). County lines is defined as the transportation of illegal drugs “from one area to another, often across police and local authority boundaries (although not exclusively), usually by children or vulnerable people who are coerced into it by gangs” (National Crime Agency, 2023). It operates through criminal networks (typically from urban regions) who introduce telephone lines in new, normally rural areas, to start a drugs market at street level (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022). Mobile lines are vital for the success of County Lines because they are the tool which “effectively connects local drug users to a hub city dealer operating in their local village or town” in turn, allowing the criminal network to achieve more revenue from their illegal trade (Coomber and Moyle, 2017, p1324). Further, from moving to more rural areas these criminal networks can grow their business without intruding on another rival dealers’ turf or being as closely linked to the illegal business taking place (Coomber and Moyle, 2017).

County lines is heavily reliant on the criminal exploitation of children (Dando et al., 2022). However, it is the supply and demand of drugs which underpins this criminal activity due to a key motivator behind it being financial gain (National Crime Agency, 2019). Especially within today’s circumstances as the cost of living continues to rise (O’Brien and McMenemy, 2022). It can be argued that there is a direct link between this and county lines because more people need money to afford the basics such as food or water and therefore become more open to the idea of making money illegally (O’Brien and McMenemy, 2022). Conversely, it could be the grow in materialism within society and the “get rich quick” mentality that opens individuals up to making money illegally (Burt et al., 2022, p3). Further, violence is also used by those involved in County Lines to increase and maintain the financial profits they make within the drugs market (HM Government, 2018).

The Office for National Statistics found that there was “a reduction in the number of adults reporting having taken any Class A drug” (which includes cocaine, heroin, crystal meth and so forth) in “the year ending June 2022” compared to the previous year (Office for National statistics, 2023). However, this

could be down to the restrictions imposed on social interaction by the coronavirus pandemic as most Class A substances are “taken in social situations” (Office for National Statistics, 2023). Additionally, the drugs that are most supplied by county lines are heroin and crack cocaine yet, only the usage of cocaine around the United Kingdom is increasing (National Crime Agency, 2019). One of the reasons for this could be the fact that crack cocaine is more profitable than heroin and is seen as a much more attractive drug to consume especially amongst younger users (National Crime Agency, 2019). In turn, this provides Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) with more business making county lines more successful.

3.2 Vulnerable People & Grooming

A common attribute found within county lines offending is that OCGs will “exploit vulnerable people, including children... by recruiting them to distribute the drugs, often referred to as ‘drug running’” (Metropolitan Police, 2023). Vulnerable people are deemed to be so for several reasons including the fact they may have a substance misuse or mental health issue, they are economically vulnerable, or they are homeless (Home Office, 2018). County lines is a never-ending cycle of exploitation, even if the tactics used by OCGs are changing the exploitation just continues (The Children’s Society, 2020a). For example, there were “reports in Merseyside of criminal groups operating a ‘click and collect’ service for couriers” whereby OCGs dressed up young people as key workers or takeaway drivers during the Coronavirus lockdown period (The Children’s Society, 2020a).

To recruit these young and vulnerable people, either in person or virtual grooming is a tool used by OCG’s (The Children’s Society, 2020a). Grooming is the process of an older individual befriending someone younger than them using incentives so that the younger person trusts them whilst at the same time being controlled and in debt to their exploiter (The Children’s Society, 2020a). The use of grooming makes county lines an even bigger and more important wellbeing and public health issue because “criminally exploited individuals are at a higher-than- average risk of drug and sexual abuse and of being convicted of crime” (Dando et al., 2022, p2). Normally boys between the ages of 14 and 17 are groomed with the pledge by the organised criminals of designer gifts or money (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022). However, it has been reported that “children as young as 12 years old” are being moved or exploited “by gangs to courier drugs” (Home Office, 2018, p5).

More vulnerable children fall victim to this type of grooming because they are seen to lack a suitable guardian that can gatekeep them, this may include children who have chaotic lives, are at a point of crisis in their lives or have mental health issues (Dando et al., 2022). However, it must be highlighted that county lines offenders are constantly adapting to their surroundings, hence, may purposely choose

a child who falls “outside this typically defined vulnerable group” to evade law enforcement (Dando et al., 2022). For example, more recently it has been uncovered that county lines offenders are enrolling within universities to make it easier to recruit students to do their business (Burt et al., 2022). Children do not often realise that they have been groomed, exploited or that they are in fact the victim of a criminal offence (National Crime Agency, 2023). It must be emphasised even if activities that have taken place as part of county lines seem consensual, there is always a strong chance that victims would have been exploited (Home Office, 2018). This being because of the unequal power dynamics, just because the young or vulnerable person is willing to do an exchange does not make them “less of a victim” (Home Office, 2018, p4).

3.3 Use of Social Media

County lines has become a larger criminal organisation because of the increased use of social media, particularly by younger people, which then puts more people at risk of grooming or exploitation by these groups (The Children’s Society, 2020a). Social media is one of the biggest recruiting and communication tools used by these criminal networks (Home Office, 2018). Using social media enables these groups to share photos and videos so they can advertise drugs, show off their status by publicising the amount of money they have, advertise when they are ready for business and any new products whilst predominantly expand their criminal networks (Metropolitan Police, 2022). Further, being able to share intelligence on members of OCGs that are imprisoned boosts their status further as it “validates their ‘criminal credentials’ and perceived capacity for instrumental violence” (Storrod and Densley, 2017, p687). Showing that, social media, to an extent, is a tool used by these criminal groups to romanticise what they do and enhance their reputation (Storrod and Densley, 2017).

It can be argued that social media has aided the spread of violence connected specifically to the drugs market (HM Government, 2018). For example, social media is being used to idealise OCGs, the drugs market and the violence that is used to exploit others and carry out their illegal business (HM Government, 2018). As well as normalizing weapon carrying (Densley et al., 2020). However, issues such as “cuts to policing numbers and budgets” seem to be contributing factors as well which will be revealed later in this dissertation (Densley et al., 2020, p5)

A more common use of social media and other messaging apps found on mobile devices is the application codes for drugs, sexual activities, and violence (Metropolitan Police, 2023). For example, some emojis have secret meanings, such as the snowflake emoji meaning cocaine and the horse emoji meaning ketamine (Surrey Police, 2022). This use of emojis can further lure young people into county

lines activity (Mwamba, 2022). As well as being useful for recruitment purposes, emojis allow for these OCGs to stay relevant and therefore achieve their goals by keeping up with the way young people communicate and use social media platforms (Storrod and Densley, 2017). It is important to note that the use of emojis alone is not necessary a sign of county lines activity (Surrey Police, 2022). However, this use of social media by these criminal networks shows just how creative they can be when trying to hide their criminal activity as they twist innocent actions into having more negative and criminal connotations (Mwamba, 2022).

3.4 Cuckooing, Plugging & Debt Bondage

The use of coercion and violence may be used by county lines systems to occupy someone's property (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022). This practice is known as cuckooing (Spicer, 2021). Likely targets of cuckooing normally have problems with addiction, are isolated or lonely (Metropolitan Police, 2023). A typical victim in this scenario would be a class A drug user (Home Office, 2018). OCGs convince their vulnerable targets by offering to pay for essentials such as food or utilities or providing them with free drugs (Metropolitan Police, 2023). Although it can be argued that there is a mutual agreement between the individual and the offender that benefits both parties, it must be highlighted that this practice normally involves exploitation, intimidation, mental, physical, and sexual abuse (Coomber and Moyle, 2017). Therefore, even if agreements made seem mutually beneficial, the victim is normally taken advantage of because of the vulnerabilities they are subjected to (Burt et al., 2022). It is common "for OCGs to use a property for a short amount of time, moving address frequently to reduce the chance of being caught" (Metropolitan Police, 2023). This tool used by county lines dealers is becoming a significant problem regarding policing (Spicer, 2021).

Plugging is the term applied "to describe the internal secretion of a package of drugs inside a bodily orifice" normally concealed within a condom or similar packaging and can contain up to "100 wraps" (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022). When plugging these drugs, especially cocaine, there is a high risk of the victim to overdose, and it can be life threatening if the package was to explode in their bodies (Northeast Addictions Treatment Center, 2023). However, this is a valuable and attractive tool to be used by senior members of county lines because it allows them to "maintain anonymity, distance themselves from criminality, and subsequently, law enforcement" as they themselves are not in harm's way (Burt et al., 2022, p2). Another aspect that must be highlighted regarding this process is that it can be deemed to be a form of sexual abuse especially when young victims are forced into taking part (Adams, 2018).

Another tool used by county lines offenders is debt bondage. This is when the offender uses a real recognisable threat that the victim has or may have in the future to maintain the control, they have over them (Brewster et al., 2021). Victims of debt bondage may be forced to deal drugs or give up their homes to be used for drug business to repay the apparent debt they owe (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022). This tactic used by county lines offenders closely links to offences under the Modern Slavery Act of 2015 because the victim is being forced into the illegal business and in a sense owned by the offender until their never-ending debt gets paid off (Burt et al., 2022). Even after it has been paid off, the offender will usually still require the victim to perform compulsory or forced labour (Modern Slavery Act, 2015). Showing that, especially in cases that involve debt bondage, county lines can be seen as a form of modern slavery. The debts can come about in several ways, from money or drugs being seized by the police to gifts the victims thought they were receiving which the offender expects them to pay back (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022). It is important to highlight that this tactic, along with others mentioned within this section are ways in which county lines offenders try to discipline and control their victims so that they can reap the benefits whilst evading law enforcement (Burt et al., 2022).

3.5 Scale & Impact

County lines offending continues to grow, with multiple urban hubs across the country being identified (National Crime Agency, 2017). Yet, many lines are being shut down. For example, in September 2020, 102 county lines were shut down (National Youth Agency, 2021). However, this has not stopped county lines activity from taking place “rather gangs and dealers have changed the ways they work” (National Youth Agency, 2021, p1). As these offenders spread further geographically, they forge new links to local communities and illegal businesses which in turn aids their recruitment process thus expanding the illegal drugs market (Pitts, 2020). Therefore, as soon as deal lines are shut down, others are being opened consisting of different routes making them harder to follow (O’Hagan and Long, 2019). This shows that county lines offending displaces when opportunities are removed and that shutting down these deal lines does not necessarily prevent this type of criminality but instead it moves it around. Overall, making it difficult to identify the true scale of county lines offending (National Crime Agency, 2017).

3.5.1 Impact on Communities

County lines offenders are not only a threat to vulnerable people but the population of the United Kingdom in general. This can be because they are always exploring new opportunities to find more victims they can exploit (National Crime Agency, 2017). For example, as previously mentioned, offenders are starting to move away from targeting young vulnerable children and instead looking at

different types of people within society to target to make it harder for law enforcement agencies to identify who is more vulnerable to county lines offending (Dando et al., 2022). They can also be a threat to the general population because of the drugs they sell. For example, drugs being dealt at street level may be cut with different ingredients (such as mixing cocaine with bleach powder) to make more of a profit (O'Hagan and Long, 2019). In turn, this increases the number of deaths caused by county lines drug dealing. In fact, in 2021 there were 4,859 recorded deaths that "related to drug poisoning" which was "6.2% higher than the rate recorded in 2020" (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

Moreover, certain companies within local communities where county lines offending takes place are complicit and help them because of intimidation or threatening behaviour they may be subjected to (National Crime Agency, 2017). For example, a report from the National Crime Agency (2017) revealed that offenders are moving away from traditional techniques such as cuckooing as "23% of all forces (10) report county lines groups using accommodation other than that acquired by cuckooing" whether they might be caravans, holiday lets or budget hotels (National Crime Agency, 2017). Local companies may also indirectly aid county lines activity as, if offenders know what companies young people congregate in the most, they can use this to their benefit and exploit more people to work for their illegal business (Wroe, 2019).

Further considerable harm has been caused by county lines networks because of the violence it creates within communities. For example, areas where drugs are being imported using county lines are reporting "increased levels of violence and weapons-related crimes as a result" (National Crime Agency, 2023). This is because groups involved in county lines rely highly on intimidation and acts of violence by using weapons to maintain the power they have over people (National Crime Agency, 2017). Showing that there is a strong connection between the drugs market and violent offences and so, where drug offences increase, violent offences follow (O'Hagan and Edmundson, 2021). For example, knife violence is prevalent in county lines offending, with the "vast majority (85%) of police forces" reporting the "use of knives, and three-quarters (74%)" reporting firearms being used within this illegal business (Pitts, 2020, p6). This surge of drug related violence then negatively impacts the community as it leads to public agencies and their resources being strained (O'Hagan and Long, 2019).

3.5.2 Impact on Victims

For victims and their families, a lot of disturbances are caused as it can result in them being exploited sexually or "enduring physical and mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and in some cases, death" (Burt et al., 2022, p4). For example, in terms of

physical abuse, it has been reported that the plugging technique is being used more not only for the transportation of drugs but the storage of them (National Crime Agency, 2017). Which, as previously stated, can be life threatening for victims and increased usage this technique means more young people's lives are at risk just for the sake of the offender's anonymity (Northeast Addictions Treatment Center, 2023). The impact of these forms of abuse and exploitation lead to victims being caught by law enforcement rather than the offenders which aids these criminal networks further by keeping them safe (National Crime Agency, 2017). This being because victims are normally coerced, persuaded or forced into working on the frontline due to how easy it is to get them on board (The Children's Society, 2020a). Conversely, the victim may become the offender as they have been exploited and groomed for so long that they normalise this criminal lifestyle and continue its legacy (Wroe, 2021)

3.5.3 Impact on Offenders:

As the environment these offenders are carrying out their criminal activity in is constantly adapting, they need to have the ability to do so as well (Brewster et al., 2021). Otherwise, they are more likely to be shut down by law enforcement. The implementation of new tools or tactics by these criminal networks is becoming more creative due to the demand (Brewster et al., 2021). As previously explored, these creative tactics range from dressing young people up as key workers as a response to coronavirus lockdowns to offenders enrolling into universities, allowing them access to more potential targets without being suspected (Burt et al., 2022). They have further evaded law enforcement by using encrypted communication methods (such as social media platforms and the use of specific emojis) for dealing which makes it harder to police their activity because it allows offenders to be further away from the target (National Crime Agency, 2017). Therefore, showing that these criminal groups have the ability to adapt their methods of offending which in turn allows them to evade law enforcement more effectively and build a stronger criminal business (National Crime Agency, 2017).

Further, it has been reported that there has been a change to the number of drugs offered, with a wider range of drugs now available (Pitts, 2020). This allows offenders to expand their market by targeting adults and adolescents who use drugs for recreational purposes and not just for addiction (Pitts, 2020). Having more consumers then positively impacts offenders because they make a larger financial profit (National Crime agency, 2017). Having more financial or material gains can further aid these groups to grow stronger and bigger (Atkinson-Sheppard et al., 2023). For example, county lines groups have been known to show off what they have online which entices more people into the business because of their desire to make "fast, quick money" as previously mentioned (Atkinson-Sheppard et al., 2023, p7).

A negative impact for offenders are turf wars that take place, allowing the winning group to impose controls (National crime Agency, 2017). As well as the obvious cause of physical harm, having a turf war take place will draw the attention of law enforcement agencies (O'Hagan and Long, 2019). Leading it to not only become a life-or-death situation but also lead to deal lines being shut down and group members being arrested (O'Hagan and Long, 2019). A way the threat of turf wars is handled by county lines offenders is through the carrying of weapons (so that if a fight does break out, they will win easily and quickly) ranging from knives to guns (Bentham, 2019). This then has a domino effect upon the community as the carrying of weapons is normalised for protection purposes and can lead to more violent outcomes as previously explained.

Chapter 4: Multi-Agency Response to County Lines

4.1 Introduction

It has been argued, regarding crime prevention in general, that a multi-agency approach is the most effective way of doing so because it brings together public, governmental and law enforcement agencies (Crawford and Jones, 1995). This is an important aspect in the combat against county lines because it is a multifaceted issue involving the illegal drugs trade, criminal, sexual and child exploitation, modern slavery, and violence as previously discussed (Burt et al., 2022). It allows agencies to formulate shared understandings or definitions of what they are responding to and put strategies in the place where they are needed the most (Pitts, 2020). This multiple strand response is suitable when tackling county lines due to the scale and serious violence included within this type of offending which requires different sectors to unite and tackle this criminal activity together (HM Government, 2018). These different sectors include the police, different government departments, the National Crime Agency, community, and voluntary divisions (Home Office 2018). By pulling multiple agencies together it allows the fight against county lines to combine “the protection of young and vulnerable persons with criminal justice outcomes” (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022). It has been argued that it is a response which strengthens the reduction of county lines activity as it allows the police and other agencies to work as one (Bryant and Bryant, 2015). When these multi-agency responses are put in place as well as the realization by agencies how valuable this method is, it can result in early intervention and the safeguarding of vulnerable young people yet, this is not always the case (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, 2020)

4.2 Maintenance of Good Relationships

It is vital for agencies involved in the response to county lines to maintain good relationships between themselves, with the public and with those seen as offenders and victims. The maintenance of these relationships can be empowering. For example, if offenders are treated with respect and shown that help is available for them then they may not only be able to make better life choices and turn their life around but, they may also change the opinions of those around them (O’Hagan and Edmundson, 2021). Showing that, maintaining a good relationship can have a rippling effect on those vulnerable to county lines.

Furthermore, it is also important to maintain "consistent, targeted, neighborhood policing, in partnership with local residents, young and old, and relevant criminal justice, welfare and educational agencies" (Pitts, 2020, p7). For example, Operation Ceasefire, which was introduced to the Boston Police Department, set out to do just this in response to firearms homicides due to the gang epidemic (Pitts, 2020). They brought together multiple agencies, police officers worked with local communities for months, alternative futures for offenders were highlighted and therefore it was an initiative that saved lives and lowered the risk of serious injury (Pitts, 2020). This intervention recognised that the relationship between the police and many local people was hostile and therefore needed improving to lower gang related crime (Pitts, 2019). Consequently, similar techniques have been adopted within the United Kingdom. For example, a public health model has been developed which aims to improve safety by tackling underlying risk factors which may lead to county lines activity taking place (Pitts, 2019). Showing that, maintaining good relationships leads to these risk factors being uncovered and tackled (Pitts, 2019).

4.3 Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) & Mapping

The success of tackling county lines is affected by "knowing which networks members are where and who they are affiliated to, and ensuring individuals are appropriately safeguarded" (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022). Which is something that mapping sets out to do. Mapping is undertaken by MASH (Pitts, 2020). MASH is a safeguarding mechanism which integrates multiple agencies to work together and discover and manage risks as quickly as possible (Shorrock et al., 2019). There is a need to collect intelligence around vulnerable individuals and county lines offending before effective safeguarding mechanisms can be implemented (Shorrock et al., 2019). Consequently, showing the need for mapping by MASH to find any emerging patterns of offending behaviour thus, creating a more detailed picture of what county lines offending looks like (Wroe, 2019).

A lack of this intelligence sharing and mapping has led to vulnerable people being subjected to harm or abuse which could have been avoided (Shorrock et al., 2019). Although a multi-agency approach should lower the risk of this occurring, agencies still fail to share information normally due to concerns around confidentiality (Shorrock et al., 2019). Further, mapping can lead to the singling out of young individuals who are deemed risky because of connections they have to county lines which may cause tensions to arise in certain friendship groups if agencies get involved (Wroe, 2021). If agencies do get involved within friendships groups, it can result in the presumption of riskiness which labels these groups as suspect purely because of the friendship connection they have to the individual at risk (Wroe, 2021). This is significant because young individuals deemed risky, in the future, may be flagged up as a risk on

safeguarding databases or be subjected to more surveillance without committing a crime just because they have the potential to be involved in county lines behaviour (Gilling, 1994). It must be highlighted that once they appear on safeguarding databases, their profiles will exist forever therefore they will always be labelled as a potential risk. To then devise a strategy to combat county lines based purely on this suspect community would be completely illogical because “precise criminal motivations vary from person to person” (Gilling, 1994, p245).

4.4 National County Lines Co-ordination Centre (NCLCC)

The NCLCC was established to unite law enforcement efforts when tackling county lines (HM Government, 2018). The “NCLCC obtains and disseminates national county lines intelligence, identifying cross border threats” (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022). It is structured using a gold, silver and bronze model whilst also incorporating the 4 P approach which stands for “prepare, prevent, pursue and protect” (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022). It also collects intelligence to be added to the county lines Matrix which is information from individual police forces regarding any county lines dealing (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, 2020). From a recent inspection lead by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, it was found that the NCLCC is useful when identifying individuals who have been flagged up in multiple police forces (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, 2020). Further, in the first intelligence search in 2019 the NCLCC was involved in “over 600 arrests and recovered over £200,000 in cash along with a substantial amount of drugs, firearms and other weapon types” (O’Hagan and Edmundson, 2021, p55). They also found approximately 1,000 vulnerable people (including both adults and children) and were able to offer them support, safeguarding and protection (O’Hagan and Edmundson, 2021). Moreover, the NCLCC also conduct intensification weeks where all police forces take part and focus their efforts on responding to county lines (UK Parliament, 2023). This has been seen as an effective tool for closing lines down for example, in between February the 27th and March the 5th of this year 276 lines were shut down which was an increase of 68% compared to the previous intensification week (UK Parliament, 2023). However, this increase in tackling county lines and the publicising of it can also lead offenders to adapt and move their illegal activities underground which will be explained later in this dissertation.

4.5 British Transport Police (BTP) County Lines Taskforce

The key aims of the BTP County Lines Taskforce is “to tackle drugs on the railway network, and to protect children and vulnerable adults who are often exploited by gangs into selling or moving drugs” (British Transport Police, 2020). Individuals who are arrested by this Taskforce are referred to agencies

that encourage them to come away from the county lines criminal lifestyle which is BTP's way of trying to safeguard these vulnerable individuals (British Transport Police, 2020). This Taskforce is beneficial because it makes it harder for county lines offending to take place on railway networks and it seemed especially effective during coronavirus lockdowns when railway platforms were much quieter and therefore it was a lot easier for officers to spot suspect behaviour (Brewster et al., 2022). However, it was easier to spot such behaviour because less of it was taking place on railway platforms and instead county lines offenders adapted to evade law enforcement once again by moving their offending away from railway networks and onto roads using hired vehicles (Brewster et al., 2022). This being said, in March 2023, the BTP County Lines Taskforce made 68 arrests, dismantled 9 county lines and safeguarded 14 individuals showing just how effective it can be (British Transport Police, 2023).

Further BTP have joined forces with "The Children's Society and their #LookCloser awareness campaign" which encourages individuals to 'Look Closer' "for signs that a child may be at risk of criminal exploitation" (British Transport Police, 2020). This was done because the exploitation of these vulnerable children is more visible in public spaces therefore there is a need to make certain agencies and the general population more aware of what may be occurring and how to best respond to it (The Children's Society, 2020b). As county lines offending is a widespread issue which is only getting bigger, it is important for agencies such as the BTP and the Children's Society to make the public aware of warning signs and who to contact if they believe this offending is taking place because law enforcement agencies cannot be everywhere all at once (The Children's Society, 2020b). Therefore, the public must act as these agencies' eyes and ears if county lines are to be effectively responded to.

Chapter 5: Effectiveness of Multi-Agency Response to County Lines

5.1 Effectiveness

“Multi-agency safeguarding coupled with law enforcement intelligence and operations will generate effective disruption outcomes” (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022). The aims of this response also appear ethically credible as they aim to improve social and welfare results as well as increase public involvement and efficiency when it comes to tackling county lines (Wastell et al., 2004). It allows the response to county lines to become more centered around public health, strengthening prevention tools which tackle the root cause of the issue at hand (HM Government, 2019). Therefore, it focuses more on changing the environment that county lines offending takes place instead of focusing purely on safeguarding victims and arresting offenders (Wroe, 2021). This shows that the multi-agency response to policing county lines is effective because tackling the root causes is more likely to be successful at shutting down these drug lines than just dealing with victims and offenders which these groups can easily fill in the gaps for (National Youth Agency, 2021).

Although there is a need for more police officers across the United Kingdom which has led to the government pushing to recruit, by March 2023, 20,000 more police officers (Home Office and The Rt Hon Suella Braverman KC MP, 2023). The multi-agency approach is beneficial when policing county lines because with reductions to the amount of police officers and their funding there is a need to pull multiple agencies together and to strengthen the public health approach to policing county lines (Spicer, 2021). It allows for police forces to work as one and therefore share specialist equipment and even officers that are already available so they can be placed in the area they are needed the most (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, 2020). Resources that are invested become more cost effective because they cut down the need for duplications due to the ability to share (Sloper, 2004). Therefore, the stress of eradicating county lines is not to just put on the shoulders of one agency which does not have the resources or intelligence to complete this task alone (Spicer, 2021). Additionally, with shared resources and information, facilities for the public can be made better showing that not only are agencies affected in a positive manner but so are the public (Sampson et al., 1988). Further allowing this approach to encompass a more reflective practice meaning both the agencies and the public can receive the best outcome regarding county lines offending.

Additionally, the pulling together of multiple agencies to tackle county lines can result in more intelligence gathering that would not be able to be done purely at the hands of one agency (Crawford and Jones, 1995). For example, The Matrix, which is the intelligence linking to county lines drug dealing, has allowed for agencies to develop a better understanding of how much county lines drug dealing is going on (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, 2020). This gathering of intelligence allows all agencies involved to have a better and improved understanding of county lines (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, 2020). Showing that even with obstacles such as the "General Data Protection Regulation", through use of a multi-agency approach, these barriers can be overcome and "effective data and information sharing" can take place to create a "Common Recognised Information Picture" (HM Government, 2019, p34).

5.2 Room for Improvement

As per usual the criminals adapt to police responses, in the case of county lines the increase in multi-agency responses has led to it being pushed underground or tactics being amended to avoid attention from law enforcement agencies (National Youth Agency, 2021). Even when lines are shut down and county lines are interrupted by law enforcement, these gaps made to stop county lines offending are then filled by local dealers or other independent lines and so this illegal business continues (National Youth Agency, 2021). Further, aspects tackled by law enforcement agencies are being iterated in the criminal world. For example, county lines offenders seem to be targeting females, white males, and those from wealthier backgrounds more than the commonly identified victim associated with this kind of offending (Brewster et al., 2022). Showing that the way in which these criminal networks are carrying out county lines offending is becoming more creative as they start to adapt to certain environments making it harder for law enforcement agencies to keep up with their every move (Brewster et al., 2021).

Further, although it is known that all young and vulnerable people are at risk of being targeted or exploited by county lines offending, there is still a widely acknowledged stereotype that victims are typically vulnerable either physically mentally or socially (Dando et al., 2022). This then allows these criminal networks to evolve and instead target people who are less likely to be approached by law enforcement such as "young people from more affluent backgrounds and girls" as previously stated (National Youth Agency, 2021). It has also been reported, because responses are mostly aimed at children, that support for young vulnerable people seems to drop as they reach the age of 18 (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, 2020). Showing that this stereotypical view can have damaging effects.

Another stereotypical view associated with county lines activity is gang association, which categorises particular groups within society as in need of police intervention because they are seen as problematic (Brewster et al., 2021). The media has strengthened this by portraying county lines as producing helpless and vulnerable victims whilst perpetrators are depicted as evil gang members when both have been exploited in one way or another (Wroe, 2021). These stereotypes continue to be “used to legitimise the over-policing of black communities and contributes to the differential treatment of young black men in the criminal justice system” (Brewster et al., 2021, p4). This being because the stereotypical view of a gang member is a young black male due to the gangs Matrix created by the Metropolitan police service which has continued to yield young black male suspects (Gayle, 2018). Therefore, there has been an overrepresentation of young men and boys from minority ethnic groups in prison for such offences which causes them to be labelled as suspect (Wroe, 2021). Also, because of this stereotype around gangs, there seems to be a focus on projects based within urban cities where gangs operate from meaning there is an increased need for youth services in more rural areas (National Youth Agency, 2021).

Moreover, barriers around information sharing can develop. As previously mentioned, confidentiality led agencies to not share vital information as different agencies have different rules around it which impacts victims in a negative manner (Sampson et al., 1988). However, laws based around information sharing are seen as not preventing “the sharing of information but act as guidelines to ensure the sharing of sensitive information is proportionate and necessary” (Shorrock et al., 2019, p202). Therefore, it is viewed that not sharing vital information is more damaging than sharing it with professionals (Shorrock et al., 2019).

Additionally, by putting multiple agencies together to tackle the same issue power conflicts may arise as certain agencies may believe that their specialist knowledge or role is more important than others (Crawford and Jones, 1995). Yet, it must be highlighted that some agencies are more powerful than others and that power relations develop because of the nature of county lines and how it forms the foundations for specific concepts of crime prevention control tools (Sampson et al., 1988). Conversely power conflicts may arise as more senior officers and members of staff are mixing with those who are less high-ranking (Crawford and Jones, 1995). However, sometimes conflicts can be beneficial and lead to better support outcomes for the victim or offender as new pathways may be explored (Sampson et al., 1988). Nonetheless, troubles may arise regarding what needs to be prioritised which then leads to multiple agencies coming together to have “plenty of discussion but little action (Gilling, 1994, p243).

Carrying on from the point above, it can be argued that the multi-agency approach is dominated by the police as they try to:

“co-opt other agencies, and even the entire community, to pursue police defined goals and objectives, rather than engaging in inter-agency work in the spirit of mutual consultation and shared agreement of goals and objectives” (Sampson et al., 1988, p480).

In opposition, from reasons explained previously it is a response to county lines which has moved away from predominately being a policing issue to now involving community-based agencies so that the root cause of this crime can be tackled (Wastell et al., 2004). Consequently, it does require the co-operation of the public and these agencies to prevent county lines offending therefore there may be a need for the police to prioritise other and even differing opinions and strategies so that they do not appear to take over (Gilling, 1994). These issues around power conflicts could be improved by promoting agencies to take part in joint training (Sloper, 2004). This would be beneficial because agencies would be able to practice working together, create a joint understanding of county lines as well as learn to respect and value “the roles of other professionals” (Sloper, 2004, p576).

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the multi-agency approach to policing county lines using qualitative secondary analysis. Applying this approach to the research topic at hand allowed the researcher to delve deep into a range of academic sources to try and find the truth and analyse findings already out there (McCartan and Robson, 2016).

The literature explored has proven that county lines continues to be a widespread and successful type of offending across the United Kingdom (National Youth Agency, 2021). This is because it involves many different types of offending, from drug trading to child exploitation (Home Office, 2018). It is also highly reliant on the use of telephone lines which makes it easier for dealers to be connected to drug users and thus boost trade and financial gain of this illegal business (Coomber and Moyle, 2017). In more recent years social media has also been used for the same purpose as well as being used to show off in general and positively advertise this type of offending to others (Metropolitan Police, 2022). Further, as this type of drug dealing regards moving to more rural areas to trade, it lessens the risk of offenders being caught by law enforcement and them intruding on another rival gang or dealers' turf (Coomber and Moyle, 2017). The use of vulnerable children and adults has also helped county lines because of how easy it is to exploit and groom these individuals to become part of the illegal network (Dando et al., 2022). More young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds seem drawn to county lines offending (Brewster et al., 2021). Raising the point that it is not the illegal trade and the criminal lifestyle that draws them in but instead it is the opportunity to be financially stable that does (Brewster et al., 2021).

Throughout this dissertation, due to the scale of county lines and what it involves, it has been seen to have devastating impacts on communities, victims, and offenders. Once lines get shut down by law enforcement, county lines offenders start to change the ways in which they work (National Youth Agency, 2021). From changing the route of deal lines to enrolling into universities to target more victims (Burt et al., 2022). One of the biggest impacts on all three categories previously stated is violence which seems to stem from offending and stretch to communities where the offending takes place. This violence has mostly included weapon related crimes, more specifically knife violence which has increased along with county lines (Pitts, 2020). Therefore, county lines can be portrayed as a difficult crime to tackle.

Nevertheless, the multi-agency response to policing county Lines has been deemed the most useful way to tackle it because it allows agencies to work as one, share information and therefore formulate shared understandings and put the most effective strategies into place (Pitts, 2020). The maintenance of good relationships, MASH and mapping, NCLCC and the BTP County Lines Taskforce were explored within this dissertation and were seen as equally important in the fight against county lines, and all contained both effective techniques and areas for improvements. The key characteristic which was highlighted in all the multi-agency responses to county lines was the maintenance of good relationships which had the ability to empower every approach thus, making them more effective with different agencies and the public (Pitts, 2019). Every approach is significant in its own way. Mapping undertaken by MASH is significant because it allows agencies to map out the geographical spread of county lines offending allowing law enforcement to discover any offending patterns (Wroe, 2019). However, mapping can lead to certain groups being ostracised more by law enforcement (Wroe, 2021). The NCLCC is significant because its main aim is to unite law enforcement in their fight against county lines by sharing intelligence and identifying threats (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022). Finally, the BTP County Lines Taskforce is significant because it continues to tackle county lines activity on the railway and has also joined forces with The Children's Society to introduce a 'Look Closer' campaign aimed at raising the awareness of the public of signs that county lines offending is taking place (British Transport Police, 2020). Yet, with the increased publicising of the positive impacts the BTP County Lines Taskforce and other multi-agency responses to county lines has had, county lines offending then moves underground making it harder to police it (National Youth Agency, 2021).

From all multi-agency policing methods explored, more areas for improvement were highlighted than effective points. Yet, this does not mean that the multi-agency approach to policing county lines is not effective. The multi-agency approach to policing county lines has certainly closed and interrupted some county lines offending (National Youth Agency, 2021). Also, it has allowed for agencies such as the police to share resources, making such resources more cost effective because of the ability to share and therefore cut down on duplications (Sloper, 2004). Further, with more agencies working together, more intelligence can be gathered to shut down more lines (Crawford and Jones, 1995). However, as county lines is a well-established business model for dealing drugs, offenders seem to be constantly learning how to evade law enforcement and improve their offending methods (O'Hagan and Edmundson, 2021). Moreover, law enforcement's stereotype of a typical victim has further allowed county lines offenders to evade them as they change the type of person they victimise (Dando et al., 2022). Another stereotype that is used within the policing of county lines is gang association. This has led to the overrepresentation of ethnic minorities within the Criminal Justice System which then ignores

other perpetrators of county lines (Wroe, 2021). Moreover, another negative produced by the multi-agency approach is that it can cause for power conflicts to arise which then leads to barriers around information sharing (Sampson et al., 1988). Therefore, county lines remains difficult to combat, even through the use of a multi-agency approach because as one line shuts down another will open, making it hard to eradicate county lines offending for good.

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