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Working County Lines: Child Criminal Exploitation and Illicit Drug Dealing in Glasgow and Merseyside

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Abstract:	This article explores recent developments within the UK drug market: that is the commuting of gang members from major cities to small rural urban areas for the purpose of enhancing their profit from drug distribution. Such practice has come to be known as working 'County Lines'. Yet, this practice has seen an increase in the exploitation of young people, a rise in violent crime, and the increased organisation of criminal groups. We present findings drawn from qualitative research with participants involved in street gangs, Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), and illicit drug supply in both Glasgow and Merseyside, UK. In conclusion, we put forward a series of recommendations which are aimed at informing police strategy, practitioner intervention, and wider governmental policy in order to effectively address this growing, and highly problematic, phenomenon.

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In the United Kingdom, cities like Glasgow and Liverpool have a long history of being major hubs for illicit drug distribution. Drugs such as heroin, cocaine, crack cocaine, and ecstasy have long been trafficked to these major cities before being distributed across the whole country (NCA, 2018). An increased demand for illegal drugs in recent years has meant an increased number of drug dealers are found in these urban cities (Densley et al., 2018). Research finds cities like Glasgow and Liverpool have been flooded with drug dealers, so much so that local drug markets have become heavily saturated (Hales & Hobbs, 2010); that is, the number of dealers is not commensurate with the number of users (Ruggiero, 2010). To overcome market saturation and maximise profits, drug gangs have begun travelling to rural areas—where drugs markets are less well established—to develop a new client base to sell to (Andell & Pitts, 2018; Windle & Briggs, 2015a). The National Crime Agency (NCA, 2016) suggests that this so-called 'County Lines' model of drug dealing is commonplace, with 71 per cent of British police forces reporting 'established' County Lines activity in their force boundaries and 12 per cent reporting an 'emerging picture'.

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County Lines drug dealing is a new and rapidly evolving illicit drug supply model which sees urban drug gangs cross police borders to courier heroin and cocaine to rural or coastal towns (HM Government, 2018). It offers a critical challenge to the existing illicit drug market research base because the exportation of illegal drugs into one or more importing areas blurs boundaries between *national* wholesale and *local* street dealing (Pearson & Hobbs 2001; for a discussion, see Coomber & Moyle 2017). More than a policing problem, County Lines also represent a public health problem in terms of harm to vulnerable populations. Child Criminal Exploitation is strongly associated with County Lines because in order to mitigate risk to themselves, criminal gangs use children as young as 12 as runners to transport and distribute drugs using dedicated mobile phones or 'lines' (HM Government, 2018). Commercial drug dealers have long harnessed the labour of low-level drug runners as

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workers in local drug markets (Preble & Casey, 1969; May & Hough, 2004). However, it is the active targeting of children and vulnerable adults and their systematic exploitation through debt bondage, 'coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons' (HM Government, 2018, p.48), that potentially separates county lines from traditional forms of drug dealing.

This article aims to contribute to exploring this phenomenon, of which little is known beyond government threat assessments and journalistic accounts (Daly, 2017; NCA, 2015, 2016, 2017), by analysing findings from two qualitative studies of gangs conducted in Glasgow, Scotland, and Merseyside, England. What little academic knowledge there is of County Lines and Child Criminal Exploitation has largely emerged from in and around London where gangs are said to be more organised and hierarchically structured (see Harding, 2014; Densley, 2012; Storrod & Densley, 2017). The current article moves beyond focusing on the issue in the South of England (e.g., Andell & Pitts, 2018; Coomber & Moyle, 2017; Windle & Briggs, 2015a) to exploring the issue in areas thus far neglected in research. Rarely are voices of the young people involved in County Lines heard, but they are necessary for building a complete picture of the problem and how it can be addressed. To this end, we use the data to answer two research questions: (1) how is County Lines drug dealing organised; (2) what emotional, physical, and social harms do County Lines labourers experience, especially children and young people?

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Literature Review

In a 2007 report, the Home Office indicated that there were 300 major importers into the UK, 3,000 wholesalers, and 70,000 street drug dealers (Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007, p. 2). While the overall prevalence of illicit drug use in Britain remains stable (Home Office, 2017), government data reveal an increased involvement of young people in different aspects

of the illicit drug market in recent years. For example, convictions of young people aged 10-17s for Class A (e.g., heroin and crack cocaine) drug production and possession with intent to supply have increased by 77 per cent between 2012 and 2016; three times the equivalent increase among adult offenders (Ministry of Justice, 2017). While some of these young people are 'user dealers' (Moyle and Coomber, 2015) or individual entrepreneurs working 'solo' (Hales & Hobbs, 2010; Windle & Briggs, 2015b), many others are embedded within 'associational criminal structures' such as gangs (Von Lampe, 2016).

The role of gangs in serious violence in Britain has been subject to fierce debate (e.g., Gunter, 2017; Hallsworth, 2013; Hallsworth & Young, 2008), but scholars have found relative consensus in the finding that gangs are involved in illicit drug markets (Aldridge et al., 2011; Bennett & Holloway, 2004; Densley, 2013, 2014; Harding, 2014; McLean, 2018; McLean, Densley & Deuchar, 2018; McSweeney et al., 2008; Pitts, 2008) and that 'illicit drug markets can drive sudden shifts in serious violence' (HM Government, 2018, p. 21). Research has found that 'being in a gang usually means being part of the drugs business' (Heale, 2012, p. 21) and that illegal drug markets were the 'single most important theme in relation to the use of illegal firearms' (Hales et al. 2006: XIV). For this reason, gangs' involvement in drug markets has become a new national priority (HM Government, 2018).

'County Lines' is the latest term adopted by police and government agencies to describe the contemporary drug dealing practices of criminal gangs (HM Government, 2018; NCA, 2015, 2016, 2017). Consistent with an evolving gang model (see Densley, 2014; McLean, 2018), and in acknowledgment of crowded markets (Windle & Briggs, 2015a), gangs send its representatives to locations outside of their metropolitan homes, a process colloquially known as going 'out there' or 'going country' (Hallworth, 2016; Storrod & Densley, 2017), to take over more lucrative drug markets and establish new customers to sell to (Andell & Pitts, 2018). To support their 'commuting' to provincial markets (Coomber &

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Moyle, 2017), moreover, gangs will take over the homes of vulnerable adults to use as a base of operation or 'crack house' (Briggs, 2010) — a process known as 'cuckooing' (Coomber & Moyle, 2017).

County Lines have been linked with an increase in homicides involving known illicit drug dealers and/or users as victims and/or suspects, and with an increase in knife crime outside of the main metropolitan areas in Britain (for a discussion, see HM Government, 2018). One explanation is that grievances in illicit drug markets cannot be settled through legal channels (see Densley, 2013), and infiltrating drug-selling gangs are much more violent than the career drug dealers who had controlled the market previously (Coomber & Moyle, 2017). The fact remains, an increasing number of children and young people have been picked up by the police in areas hundreds of miles from their homes (NCA, 2017), and even if their absences from home and school were brief, they represent a safeguarding concern (Sturrock & Holmes, 2015). Such is the gravity of the use of children in County Lines that recent media headlines have discussed it as the next 'new grooming scandal' (Davenport, 2017). HM Government (2018, p.8) reports, 'Once caught up in county lines, exploited individuals are at risk of extreme physical and/or sexual violence, gang recriminations and trafficking'.

Like with Child Sexual Exploitation, Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) involves an element of grooming, however little published research exists on the relationship between perpetrator and victim (see Firmin, 2018). HM Government (2018, p.8) explains that CCE,

> occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or (c) through violence or the threat of violence. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual.

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Research has found that Child Criminal Exploitation does not necessarily involve physical contact, but rather can occur through online 'remote mothering and online collateral' on smart phones and social media (Storrod & Densley, 2017, p. 687). As first described by Densley (2014, p. 533), one unique aspect of County Lines is the use of a branded mobile phone 'line' established in the market, to which drugs orders are placed by introduced customers. The line is commonly (but not exclusively) controlled by a third party remote from the market, such an 'elder' gang member, who, in turn, supervises his or her own 'downline' of direct-sales people.

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Beyond 'street capital' or status rewards (Harding, 2014), criminally exploited youth typically receive tangible rewards for working County Lines, such as money, alcohol, drugs, and accommodation (Knowsley Safeguarding Children's Board, 2017). In many cases, affection and significance are sufficient to keep many aspiring children enticed into the gang lifestyle because it provides the familiarity of family structure and represents an achievable form of success for young people who might be segregated from mainstream cultural and institutional life by virtue of age, class, race, or community (Sharkey et al., 2011). Current discourses surrounding the *exploiters* and *exploited* involved in County Lines portray a helpless victim that has been forced against his or her will into a life of criminality, by a ruthless violent gang member (NCA, 2015); the current research aims in part to learn whether this depiction is accurate.

HM Government (2016, 2018) has made tackling County Lines a national priority, but there exists little knowledge about its operation outside of London and the English South Coast. Further, we know little about who the actors in this world are, especially those who do not fit neatly into either victim or perpetrator categories; such as, the drug runners who take part in out of town drug dealing through their own volition. Prevailing discourses around County Lines imply that young people are determined to act by a gang structure that produces

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them as subjects without agency. The current study gives voice to the youth involved in County Lines at multiple levels, including some that have been criminally exploited and others who do the exploiting. This article explores the many nuanced issues surrounding the County Lines phenomena and attempts to paint a clear picture gathered from those involved, including practitioners tasked with addressing the issue.

Method

The data presented is taken from two independent studies, occurring at two different sites: (1) Glasgow, Scotland, and the surrounding conurbation; and (2) the Merseyside boroughs of Liverpool and Sefton in England. The Scottish participants were initially part of a larger study investigating the relationship between street gangs and organised crime (Author). Participants from the England site were part of a three-year study into gangs and Child Criminal Exploitation (Author). We recognize that the term gang is contested (Hallsworth & Young, 2008), which when combined with the logistical challenges of multi-site research, makes comparative research on 'gangs' difficult (Klein, 2005). However, the 'consensus Eurogang definition' of durable and street-orientated youth groups whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity (Klein & Maxson, 2006, p.4) was designed for such purposes and is sufficiently general to capture the essence of the groups described herein.

Further, both studies were theoretically and methodologically similar enough to warrant a comparative analysis (for a discussion, see Van Hellemont & Densley, 2018). Both studies were granted ethical approval by the researcher's respective universities and informed consent was obtained from each participant. Participant names printed here are pseudonyms. Both studies were qualitative by design and as such emergent themes resulting from thematic

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analysis shed considerable light on myriad issues pertaining to drug distribution, including the practice of working County Lines.

Glasgow

The second author gathered primary data between 2013 and 2016 as part of qualitative inquiry focusing on the relationship between gang organisation and gang activity. Scotland's largest city, Glasgow, has a long history of gang related crime (Davies, 2013; Deuchar, 2013; Fraser, 2015). The larger Glasgow conurbation retains around 70 per cent of Scotland's organised criminal activity: 65 per cent being directly related to the illegal supply of narcotics (Scottish Government, 2015, p. 6). Thus, it proved ideal for exploring gangs' involvement in County Lines. Participant criteria was set as: a) having engaged in regular group offending; b) having been involved in activities identified by Police Scotland (2016) as organised crime (OC); and c) be over 16 years of age. Participants were accessed initially via street workers attached to key outreach projects and a snowball sampling technique thereafter. In total, 42 (ex)offenders aged between 16 and 35 were interviewed, plus five practitioners.

During interviews, great effort was undertaken to deploy a semi-structured interview schedule that would allow the researcher to be responsive to emerging insights. One of these themes was centred around the morality of offending. Extracts chosen illustrate interviewees' personal construction of reality through their own voices. Multiple interviews were scheduled with participants whenever possible, ranging between one to five, typically lasting one hour. Although most interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis, three group interviews were held with groups of three, four and five participants. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Data were triangulated whenever possible – typically with youth workers or other interviewees.

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Merseyside

Data were gathered during 2017 and 2018 as part of a Merseyside case study into gangs and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). Made up of five boroughs, Merseyside is home to Liverpool, Sefton, Knowsley, St. Helens and Wirral. The research was primarily conducted in Liverpool and Sefton, where gangs and organised criminal groups are shown to be the most prevalent. Like Glasgow, Liverpool is well known for gang activity and drug supply, standing as one of the national drug supply hubs (NCA, 2016) and, outside London, has been identified as Britain's centre for organised crime (Heale, 2012), and second highest exporter of drugs and young people (NCA, 2017). Adding to the growing concerns of practitioners across Merseyside in relation to the age of young people becoming known to services such as Youth Offending Teams (YOT, to supervise young people who have been ordered by the court to serve sentences in the community or in custody), was a stark increase in gun crime and gang-related issues respectively. Between April 2016 and April 2017, the Liverpool Echo (Merseyside's daily newspaper) reported 89 shootings in Merseyside, a rise of 50 per cent from the previous year, with many victims under the age of 18 (Thomas, 2017). While Child Criminal Exploitation has, until now, largely remained ignored, the latter half of 2017 gave rise to the newly emerging social and criminal justice issue in the media, accompanied by discourse surrounding newly termed gang processes such as 'County Lines' and 'Cuckooing'. In the absence of academic literature outlining these processes, the current study was necessary.

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Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 practitioners working with gang-involved young people across Merseyside including: Police, Youth Offending Teams, health professionals, intervention workers and Safer Community Partnerships. Interviews typically lasted for around 60 minutes. Additional interviews were conducted with seven gang-involved young people, and one focus group was held with five other gang-involved young

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people, all of whom were over the age of 14 (mean age = 15) and were accessing either alternative education providers or Youth Offending Teams and were accessed via gatekeepers. In total, 38 individuals participated in the research. Interviews were performed on a one-to-one basis and either recorded via audio devices or in note form (to reassure and secure a level of trust and respect to the young people that feared repercussions of being identified).

Findings

Data from both sites were coded and analysed thematically (Creswell, 1994). These emergent themes are outlined below as 'Going Country', 'Working the Lines', and 'Exploitation'.

Going Country

As discussed, complex processes apropos cultural, political, and socio-economic globalisation have resulted in changes to the UK drug market (for a discussion, see Pitts, 2008) and, in some localities, their complete saturation (Hales & Hobbs, 2010). Practitioner John states:

> 'Years back, most the guys I knew would drink, some would smoke cannabis now and then. We just thought they were hippies, know…the 80s seen a big drug epidemic know. Heroin mostly… resulted in the [paisley] drug wars here. Basically, drugs took off and were flooding the streets. A few big dealers fought it out for control of the market in Fergsulie Park…. [at present it is] even worse now. Every second street has a dealer or two.' – (John, Glasgow)

Such changes had local consequences, whereby resident 'hardmen' sought opportunities in the drugs trade, resulting in 'drug wars'. However, as John points out, the UK drug market continued to grow to the extent that it became impossible for a single drug dealer or any one drug gang to monopolize or 'govern' drug markets (Campana & Varese, 2018; McLean et al.,

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2018). Instead, local drug dealers began to commute to other, less saturated markets, to avoid competition altogether:

> '[Glasgow area X] is bad, heavy dodgy [people] get attacked, it happens all the time. It's just one of them risks way doing this type of shit [here]…. I moved here [to rural village] to get away from it all, too wild [in Glasgow]. Hassle from everyone…. It is shite [here in village] … [at] least here there is only really myself and a few others that do what I do. One other boy from Glasgow, spoke to him a few times but keep my distance really, guys no right.' – (Marie, Glasgow)

Drug dealers commute owing to too much competition, given their social capital, fear of victimization, and to avoid turf wars. Marie relocated from Glasgow to a rural village in the south of Scotland based on a combination of all three reasons. Yet, while Marie's criminal gang supplies drugs from her village to other local surrounding villages, she likewise retains supply lines into Glasgow via her younger male sibling who has a reputation for 'being able to handle himself'. Similar practices were observed in Liverpool:

> 'I moved away because [I had] too much beef with everyone, like round by ours [Liverpool] all these kids just started moving round n that … I got caught on me own by like 6 kids it was heavy … they tried to cut me init but it never worked, like it grazed me back you know what I mean, me coat was everywhere, I was running home n I had no feathers in me coat or nothing it was heavy.' – (Elliot, Liverpool)

However, it is important to note that 'going country' was not always about avoiding fierce competition with perceived 'dangerous gangs'. Rather, commuting was also about maximizing profits, whereby locally successful criminal groups extended their lines of supply. The rapid growth of drugs markets consequently coincided with not only a change in supply processes, but also the demise of traditional criminal structures. Owing to market forces, but also dedicated law enforcement action, respondents argued that the influence of

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traditional family-based criminal gangs had declined in Glasgow and Merseyside. As a result, a more diverse mix of younger, socially-based, but still profit-driven, criminal groupings have emerged to compete for profits (see Densley et al., 2018; Pearson & Hobbs, 2001; Pitts, 2008).

County Lines require a large pool of younger 'runners' to transport and sell illicit drugs. As such, our findings are consistent with a large body of research documenting the articulated structure of drug-dealing gangs in Britain (e.g., Densley, 2013; Harding, 2014; Pitts, 2008). Also consistent with this work was the unequal relationships between those who undertake street labour and those who organize it (McSweeney et al., 2008)—the fact that the runners assumed a lot of the risk associated with drug dealing, but received very little reward. For example, one Merseyside participant was sent from Sefton to Cardiff for two weeks to sell cocaine and heroin, on the promise of receiving 'a grand a week'. Not only did he not receive this money, but whilst there, he was arrested by an undercover police officer posing as a drug user. He explained how he was first transported from his hometown to the new drug supply base:

> 'The person who I was doing it for picked me and me mates up from Liverpool and we just drove there at night with like five ounces of heroin plugged … the person you do it for answers the phone and we were just going out to serve the smackheads [drug addicts]' – (Smurf, Sefton)

Smurf here described the mobile phone 'line' of clients he worked at the direction of his 'elder' (Pitts, 2008; Densley, 2014). Rather than pay him a fair wage or cut of the profits, however, his elder simply made sure he was 'looked after' and his immediate needs were met. Elliot had a similar experience:

> 'One of the older kids just said … do you wana make some proper money and I was like yeah, [he] just started sending me to all mad places all over the country … every few days

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> [he'd] bring me more stuff like some weed, a fucking, change of clothes … they'd always give me shower gel … new socks and boxies [underwear] and stuff like that'. – (Elliot, Liverpool)

It is important to note that every single participant in the Merseyside study engaged in normalised cannabis consumption. It soon became apparent that, amongst other things, this was the hook used by criminal gangs to entice young people into selling drugs on their behalf. We did not find evidence of people involved in drug distribution solely to profit from 'free drugs,' as opposed to monetary profit per se. Instead, the vast majority of participants were dealing drugs to pay off drug debts that dealers had allowed them to accrue over a long period of time—a form of indentured servitude. One Merseyside participant discussed the process known as 'strapping' or 'on tick,' which enables young people to have drugs upfront without paying for them, mirroring a buy now and pay later scheme:

> 'All in all I owe them [drug dealers] about 12 hundred quid … I was just strapping it off them … they won't case [hassle] you, they've got dough, but if it's been ages and they see you they'll give you a little slap (kick your head in)'. – (Smurf, Sefton)

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Most young people in the Merseyside study owed something to a drug dealer. Debt, they argued, represented a specific realm of risk for any drug dealer. It was a causal factor in violence, with some respondents describing episodes of drug debt–related kidnapping, sexual violence, and torture. But because dealers utilised debt as a form of coerced recruitment into the trade (i.e., those who had accrued small debts were asked to sell drugs to pay them off), it was also an essential part of what made working the County Lines appealing.

Working the Lines

While HM Government (2018), along with a growing number of scholars (e.g., Coomber & Moyle, 2017) recognise the problem of County Lines, little information currently exists about

exactly how it is organised and what local and regional variations exist. While the participants at the English site labelled such behaviour as 'out there' or 'trapping', for example, in Scotland 'going country' remained somewhat 'undefined':

> 'I call it trappin yeah, like I've never heard it being called 'going country' or 'county lines' … but like I've heard it getting called OT [out there] or cunch … like country but cunch, fields, OT, out the way, trappin, in the bando (abandoned house) … a bando is where all the shit gets sold, that's where it comes from, but OT … or trappin [is the most used].' – (Elliot, Liverpool)

> 'Years ago the suburban areas around Glasgow used to be quite nice and all…it is not like that nowadays. Bishopbriggs, Giffnock, [Newton] Merons, them places, well they are just like most places in Glasgow now. All the same…. Well known [criminals/criminal groups] from the rough areas send young boys out to them places to supply to youths to sell.' – (Clair, Glasgow)

Merseyside practitioners were far more in tune with the national and political discourse around County Lines (e.g., HM Government, 2018) than their Scottish counterparts, for example:

> 'County lines is where organised criminals … identify a vulnerable person [drug user] outside of the area, they'll cuckoo them … they'll give that person cannabis, cocaine, whatever and say right you've got £300 debt and you've got no means to pay that so the only way you're gonna pay that is by offering them the opportunity to use [their] house, so then they'll [drug dealers] move in, so you've got your organised criminal, runner, cuckoo, nest formation … vulnerables [young people] and [that is] your network'. – (Chief Superintendent, Merseyside Police)

Among the Scottish sample, however, there was acknowledgment that activity consistent with the County Lines label was occurring. Participants recognised that there was

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considerable profit to be made from exploiting the west of Scotland's disproportionate access to illegal drugs (see Densley et al., 2018; McLean, Densley & Deuchar, 2018).[1] Several participants spoke about travelling, either themselves or other gang members, to smaller urban towns and villages with intent to supply drugs.

In contrast to English studies that find seaside 'holiday' resorts and other popular destinations specifically targeted by drugs gangs (e.g., Coomber & Moyle, 2017), the Scottish sample practiced County Lines in far more isolated and recluse areas. Marie explained:

> 'Good down here. Quiet so no much people giving any hassle. Hardly any Police as well… [and] loads a wee villages about… I get [male gang members X & Z] to do [reconnaissance]… basically scope the place first and if it is cool then they start dealing.… in the town centre, [via local] users…. [they] get the users to start selling for [them].' – (Marie, Glasgow)

When asked how County Lines were first established, Marie continued:

> '[Male gang member X] is bold. He just asks [the user] to let him stash gear in their house and sell from there… [he then] puts a set up in their house. They sell, and [he] collects every other day…they get an allowance (free drugs for personal use) from what we put there [in order to reduce] bumping us.' – (Marie, Glasgow)

Dealing in smaller, more rural areas meant there was a reduced police presence and an ability to impose dominance over local dealers, motivations consistent with existing County Lines theory (HM Government, 2018), yet violence was still known to erupt in commuter areas because other criminal groups practicing County Lines would simultaneously arrive in the

[1] The Scottish Serious Organised Crime Strategy (2015, 2016) acknowledges that the West of Scotland retains around 70% of the countries organised crime, over 60% of which is directly related to the illicit supply of drugs, in which over 300 Serious Organised Crime Groups operate.

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market.[2] One Police participant indicated that Merseyside gangs were in dispute with each other in county locations over drug territory:

> '[We] had a murder in Shrewsbury which was a Sefton nominal … 17 years of age … got murdered by Speke nominals, so it was getting played out in a council estate in Shrewsbury, two organised crime groups all fighting for the same patch, the reason why it's happening in those county locations is because there isn't a recognised criminal gang structure in there so organised crime groups come in and basically terrorise the local criminals, they've never [before] seen the level of violence … they're scared stiff so they comply cause they just think woah, never seen anything like this'. – (Detective Superintendent, Merseyside Police)

Steve from Glasgow provided another example:

> 'We were selling to young boys from [village A]…. so fucking was [rival gang]. Fuck that, they cunts, trying to mussel in aye, no, no, no chance…. I went and seen the boys [from village A], personally, got them told "you get them cunts selling for [rival gang] stabbed, I don't care who the fuck it is, even if its your maw (mum)"….the lads did well, a heavy barney (fight) went down, they did well.' – (Steve, Glasgow)

To overcome fierce competition for often small patches of drug territory, respondents said that young runners often had to use their initiative. Elliot from Liverpool continued:

> 'I was the best in Stoke yeah I never just stayed in the house, I used to get out there, some of them [runners] just stay in the house and wait for a phone call but I'd get out there and like, wanna get known round there and let everyone know that I was dealing and make more money for the boss, and more money for meself as well you know what I mean'. – (Elliot, Liverpool)

As explored in the following section, however, the exploitation of children and vulnerable drug users was a necessary aspect of innovation in County Lines activity. Drug dealers

[2] See BBC (2015) for report of shooting in Duddingston, Edinburgh, involving gang members operating along extended county lines, originating in London.

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needed a number of young people at their disposal and required the homes of vulnerable drug users in their newly established drug markets.

Exploitation

The descriptions of County Lines provided by respondents very much highlighted exploitative processes such as marginalised children and young people, drug addicts, and women, selling drugs, often from their own homes, on behalf of more powerful criminal gangs from the major cities. This dynamic allowed criminals to remain largely hidden from law enforcement and even other rival drugs gangs, therefore being able to conduct covert drug wars in satellite areas. Thus, should the local representatives be arrested, the criminal gang could simply cut ties and relocate. Similarly, should these runners miss a payment (or be 'light' on a payment), have their goods stolen, or build bad debts, then the criminal gang supplying the drugs could impose itself upon them and demand payment. Marie explains the process of collecting bad debts from those who have their homes taken over for use as traphouses (known as 'cuckooing', see Coomber & Moyle, 2017).

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> 'Don't get me wrong, they do come up short sometimes…am no that harsh, give a warning. [Sibling A] might tax them but, know like interest. Fuck, even puts the girls out to work if it's a good bit….only till debts paid….wouldn't do that to like anyone, but [they are] smackheads (heroin addicts)… its nothing to them.' – (Marie, Glasgow)

Marie notes how 'it's nothing' for some drug dealers and users to 'puts [sic] the girls out to work', which is a reference to forced prostitution. As a woman, Marie said she 'wouldn't do that,' but the implication here, as in other interviews, was that County Lines drug dealing and sexual exploitation were linked.

Further, Elliot describes how gangs leverage drug addiction in order to secure compliance from home owners:

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> 'Sometimes they ask for more and you've gotta be straight and say nah you're not getting no more … I give them [heroin addicts] three bits (heroin and crack) for 24 hours you know what I mean, his house is mine.' – (Elliot, Liverpool)

Vulnerable drug users find themselves in an impossible situation. Their addiction to drugs makes it easy for criminal gangs to exert power and control, manipulating the drug user to believe that they are getting a good deal. Some dealers exchange drugs for sex or coerce users into other dangerous and humiliating acts. Elliot continued:

> 'I've been asked by a man before like and I've just terrored [sic] him and said 'nah lad I'm not gay lad fuck off, go and lash your boyfriend' … I've done it with girls 'n that, I've been bought. This one crackhead … said 'I'll give you a suck for a bit yeah' and I've said 'nah fuck off, leg it', or 'I'll give ya two bits (drugs) yeah if you eat that ash tray' and he's eaten it … some crackheads are funny though … I made this crackhead eat shit 'n that for rocks … I was like look I'll pay ya 3 bits to do it … and he picked shit up with his hand and ate it.' – (Elliot, Liverpool)

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Beyond coercion into sex or self-harm, vulnerable drug users can be held hostage in their own homes and, in some cases, forced into temporarily giving up their homes so that gangs can set up shop there. Later, it is young people themselves who are the victims, when they commute in from their home towns to sell drugs in a stranger's home:

> '[Organised criminals think] 'I know there's an opportunity to deal drugs and I know there's a drugs market, I don't wana go and live in Bournemouth, I wanna stay in Croxteth [Liverpool], but I want money so how am I gonna do that? You know what, I'm gonna get him to do it and pay them very little, or I'm gonna pay them nothing cause I'm gonna threaten them to do it and they're gonna live down in Bournemouth in a drug dealers house, or a drug users house, and I'm gonna threaten them as well and I'm gonna use violence to say 'he's coming to live in your house and you can't do anything about it cause if you do I'll cut your leg off''. – (Detective Superintendent, Merseyside Police)

Interviewees observed how drug dealers' initial promises soon turned into threats and in some cases, drug sellers were physically locked in premises so they were unable to escape.

Exploitation was a key feature of County Lines when described by practitioners such as Clair:

> '[I've] been in this job too long… definitely, I think there has been clear changes [with gang organisation]… older gang members will use kids to like [carry] their drugs for them and take them here, there, and everywhere….[be]cause underagers [sic] can't get a criminal record…Criminals just work the system don't they.' – (Clair, Glasgow).

However, 'exploitation' was practitioner terminology, a variation on 'gang talk' (Hallsworth & Young, 2008). The challenge with any form of exploitation is that the victims seldom see themselves as such. Exploitation was something that happened to others, especially from the perspective of those doing the exploiting. Unlike Child Sexual Exploitation, the victims of Child Criminal Exploitation were mostly male. In an attempt to uphold their perceived masculine status, young male respondents routinely rejected the victim label to profess that drug dealing was their own (rational) choice. The Merseyside participants acknowledged they were being 'used' to some extent, but they also spoke favourably of going 'out there'.

Regardless of the risk of violence, danger, and contact with the criminal justice system, many young people claimed that working County Lines was easy and highly lucrative. Participants in the Merseyside study questioned where else they would be able to make large amounts of money considering their age and lack of academic achievement.

> 'What job are you gonna get paid 330 pound every two days, grand a week basically, more, it's easy … you gotta train for 20 years … when you can just become a crack dealer like that [clicks fingers].' – (Smurf, Sefton)

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In Glasgow, due to comparable experiences of social and economic marginalisation, and a perceived limited access to otherwise legitimate work, drug dealing was described as the only way in which youth could feel successful in society—a common theme among research in this area (e.g., Densley & Stevens, 2015).

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper examined the organisation of County Lines drug dealing and gave voice to the emotional, physical and social harms experienced by County Lines labourers, namely children. It moved the literature beyond London and surrounding communities (e.g., Coomber & Moyle, 2017), to provide a broader picture of County Lines illicit drug dealing in Britain. While the phenomenon identified by police as County Lines is perhaps underdeveloped in Glasgow and Liverpool compared to London and the south coast, our findings confirm that County Lines still enable criminal gangs to maximise profits and reduce their risk of being caught by police. How County Lines present may differ slightly depending on the site in which they are examined, but in Merseyside and Glasgow, as in London, County Lines involve criminal groups establishing a network between an urban hub and a county location, into which drugs are supplied (NCA, 2017). And vulnerable populations, including children under the age of 18, are used to travel between the urban hub and the new drug market to supply drugs for little reward.

The current study further provided new insights into the under explored area of exploitation of vulnerable peoples by illicit enterprises (e.g., Atkinson-Sheppard, 2015). Prior research has found criminal gangs identify young people that they think will make good drug dealers, and the ease of exploiting these young people lies heavily within socioeconomic disadvantage (for a review, see Densley, 2018). Through conspicuous consumption and impression management both in person and on social media, gang members are able to display the glamourous aspects of their lifestyle (Harding, 2014; Storrod & Densley, 2017).

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Such is the attraction of this lifestyle, that young people admire gang members and aspire to be like them. For young people with little belief in their future prospects, making fast money becomes a personal priority that criminal gangs can exploit. It binds them to a wide range of imaginable horrors that come with the territory, from exposure to normalised heroin and crack use, to risky sexual activity (Briggs, 2010).

County Lines cross traditional police force boundaries, therefore any response must bring law enforcement together to ensure intelligence and information is shared and the links with criminal exploitation and illegal drugs markets are identified (NCA, 2017). At the same time, tackling the root causes of gang culture and its implications for drug distribution involves more than a reactive law enforcement response; that is, a movement toward a wider justice policy rhetoric focused on tackling social and economic marginalisation. Doing so will involve putting local people and communities at the heart of decision-making through a focus on co-production of ideas for addressing these issues. Our findings suggest some young people will justify or 'neutralize' their exploitation (Sykes & Matza, 1957), therefore, a communication strategy is needed to raise awareness of the unequal power dynamic at the heart of County Lines, to educate people that the receipt of something in return for something does not make the young person or vulnerable adult any less of a victim.

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Moreover, the way in which policies for tackling gangs and drug markets are conceptualised and applied needs to take cognisance of the nature and impact of gang activity in local settings. Our insights suggest that the undisputed allure of the drug market in stimulating gang 'evolution' into County Lines has implications for wider drug policy (Densley, 2014; McLean, 2018). The view that prohibition and drug enforcement can be effective in preventing problem drug use is widespread across the Western world, but it has been argued that drug laws—which tend to be driven by a moral view which valorises the currency of abstinence—often cause more harm than good (Stevens, 2011). To truly prevent

County Lines, the policy discourse in Britain may need to transition from a focus on prohibition to a focus on drug harm reduction and (in some cases) decriminalisation.

Further, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS, 2017) recently published a report about the policing response to modern slavery and human trafficking. The Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, Kevin Hyland, used the opportunity to argue that using children to transport and sell illicit drugs in County Lines operations was a form of 'modern-day slavery' (see Pepin, 2018). In December 2017, London's Metropolitan Police Service (2017) reported that, 'in the first case of its kind in the UK', two gang members running a County Line had been convicted of human trafficking offences after exploiting a vulnerable woman to transport and sell drugs. This would suggest that there is clear potential to prosecute gangs engaged in County Lines operations under the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which under Section 2.1 defines when 'a person arranges or facilitates the travel of another person ('V') with a view to V being exploited' as 'trafficking' and in Section 3 defines when 'a person uses or attempts to use [a child] (a) to provide services of any kind, (b) to provide another person with benefits of any kind, or (c) to enable another person to acquire benefits of any kind' as 'exploitation' (see Dent, 2017). At the same time, however, statutory safeguarding processes and multi-agency support are needed to protect and prevent harm to children at risk from criminal exploitation.

It is important to recognise the small-scale nature of our research and therefore to be cautious about applicability claims. Additional research is needed to explore and examine emerging markets and distribution systems in more depth and thus provide a more nuanced picture of the localised realities of County Lines. However, findings here illuminate young people's involvement in County Lines, and the dynamic operation of and emerging issues within drug markets in Britain. Given the unique insights emerging from the participant interviews, the research findings could hold the potential to more clearly inform policy-

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