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Practice Question: What are County Lines?

Safeguarding requires Children's Nurses to understand the vulnerabilities that Children and Young People (CYP) possess, as well as the risks that they face. County lines involves the criminal exploitation of CYP, and this article will introduce this concept for the Children's Nurse.

What are County Lines?

In April 2018, HM Government first placed focus on 'tackling county lines' as a priority for crime in the United Kingdom. The 'Serious Violence Strategy' defines county lines as "gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of "deal line" (HM Government, 2018, pp48). The term 'county line' refers to the phone line used to take orders for drugs (National Crime Agency, (NCA), 2020).

The development of county lines allows for drug dealers from cities to sell their drugs in distant locations where there are less saturated markets and less competition (Robinson, McLean and Densley, 2019). Coomber and Moyle (2018) identify three commonly used terms; 'commuting' whereby the dealer travels to new areas to distribute drugs, 'holidaying' where county lines dealers stay for short periods in the area before returning to their hub, and 'cuckooing' where a county lines dealer takes over accommodation in their new location and uses it as a local dealing base.

Though the term 'county lines' has been recognised on a national level, many CYP involved may know this under another name including; going 'out there', 'trap-ping' or 'going country' (Robinson, McLean and Densley, 2019).

How do County Lines exploit Children and Young People?

County lines exploit CYP to move and store both drugs and money, often using coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons (HM Government, 2018). CYP are often enticed into distributing and selling drugs through 'gifts' including drugs and clothing or money and then are forced to continue to work for county lines when they become indebted to the gang or through violence (Robinson, McLean and Densley, 2019). CYP are most frequently used in the lower levels of county lines organisations, as 'sitters' who remain resident in the host towns and 'runners' who actively deal drugs at the street level (Spicer, 2019).

CYP as young as 12 are at risk for exploitation (Robinson, McLean and Densley, 2019), with both males and females affected, though a large percentage fewer county lines offences are recorded for females (Windle, Moyle and Coomber, 2020). Where females are involved, Moyle (2019) describes the 'boyfriend' model, whereby a drug dealer will form a relationship with a female, before coercing them into criminal behaviour.

CYP are not always forced or coerced into illicit activity and some voluntarily enter into county lines activity, yet this still creates concern over their exposure to danger, criminality, drug misuse and corruption (NCA, 2020; Stone, 2018). CYP who are frequently targeted are 14-17 year-old boys with those most at risk of exploitation including; those with welfare needs, looked after children, CYP who are known to child social care or youth offending teams and CYP of parents or caregivers with mental health issues (Windle, Moyle and Coomber, 2020).

Children's Nurses need to be able to recognise and refer CYP at risk of exploitation, such as those who display a sudden change in mood, an involvement in substance misuse or criminal behaviour, going missing for periods of time or those with a sudden increase in money or unaffordable new

items (NCA, 2020). For advice or support about CYP who may be involved in county lines, Children's Nurses can contact their local safeguarding leads or teams whilst ensuring they remain up to date with local safeguarding procedures.

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