

Useful contacts

Neighbourhood Police – to find details of your local team and find out more about the work they are doing in your area, search your postcode at www.police.uk.

Crimestoppers – a free, confidential service where you can report information about a crime anonymously.

Freephone: **0800 555 111**

Web: www.crimestoppers-uk.org

Local Authority/Council – connect to your Local Authority and find out about local specialised work with gangs, parent groups and activities for young people in your area. They can also refer you to parenting support programmes.

Web: www.gov.uk/find-your-local-council

Family Lives – gives advice on all aspects of the parenting role and is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Freephone: **0808 800 2222**

Web: www.familylives.org.uk

National Council for Voluntary Youth Services – network of over 280 national organisations, and regional and local networks that work with and for young people.

Web: www.ncvys.org.uk

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) – runs a wide range of services for both children and adults, including a national helpline and local projects. Their helpline is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Freephone: **0808 800 5000**.

Email: help@nspcc.org.uk

Web: www.nspcc.org.uk

Anti-Bullying Alliance – advice on bullying.

Web: www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk

Victim Support – a national charity supporting people affected by crime.

Web: www.victimsupport.org

Missing People – if your child goes missing for long periods of time, Missing People can help you find them.

Freephone: **116 000**

Text: **116 000** (you can even text this number if you have run out of credit)

Web: missingpeople.org.uk

St Giles Trust SOS

Call: **020 7708 8000**

Web: stgilestrust.org.uk

GOING COUNTRY

“My son went
missing for days”

“No one gets my reality
but *they* do”

With so many stories about County Lines and gangs in the press and on social media, no one could blame any parent or caregiver for being concerned about it – wondering what to look out for and what they can do. This leaflet has been designed to give parents, guardians and caregivers the information they need.

County Lines – What are they?

'County Lines' refer to the use of telephone/mobile numbers circulated to users in a particular area for ordering drugs such as heroin and crack cocaine (although cannabis and MDMA are also used).

The telephone number is usually operated from outside the area. This is how the group builds their brand. Unlike other criminal activities where telephone numbers are changed on a regular basis, these telephone numbers are maintained and protected, often by gangs and organised crime groups which 'target' the areas, either because they have a good illegal economy (for example, a large number of drug users) or because they have decent transport links to London.

Young people will rarely say that they are running a 'County Line' or 'Country Line'. They are more likely to say that they are 'Running a Line' 'Going Cunch' or 'Going O.T.' (which stands for Over There, Out There or Outta Town).

'Cuckooing' is the term used to describe the practice of taking over the property of a vulnerable person or an abandoned building (sometimes referred to as a 'Bando' or a 'spot'). The property is then used as a place from which to run the dealers' drugs business. It is often taken over by force or coercion, and in some instances victims have fled their homes in fear of violence.

The drug dealers will target those who are vulnerable, potentially as a result of substance abuse, mental health issues, or loneliness, and befriend them or promise them drugs in exchange for being able to use their property.



How does the operation work?

The group begin by taking over premises in the target town – sometimes by coercion, by using property belonging to local addicts who are paid in drugs, or by beginning a relationship with a vulnerable female.

Once in place they use common marketing tactics to get established, including introductory offers. They then set about expanding the ‘workforce’; recruiting local runners to deliver drugs and money. The groups often use children, because they work for little pay, are easy to control, and are less likely to be detected.

A recent report found that most runners are boys aged between 11 and 17 and that grooming with gifts and money to control them via a ‘debt’ was common. Where girls were used, they sometimes also became the victims of sexual violence.

The groups continually use various tactics to evade detection, including rotating gang members between locations so they are not identified by law enforcement or competitors, and using women and children to transport drugs in the belief that they are less likely to be stopped and searched.



What are the signs?

There are a number of behavioural warning signs that you should be looking out for:

- ◆ Repeatedly going missing for long periods of time
- ◆ Sudden rise in truancy/staying out unusually late
- ◆ Money, clothes or accessories which they are unable to account for
- ◆ Being stopped in relation to drugs – especially if this is outside your area
- ◆ Being involved in fights or disorder – again, especially if this is outside your area
- ◆ Being stopped and searched in the presence of other gang members
- ◆ Changes in behaviour, becoming fearful and/or withdrawn and/or prone to unexplained outbursts of anger
- ◆ Being secretive (more guarded than usual for a typical teenager)
- ◆ Real distancing from one or both parents/caregivers
- ◆ Carrying weapons
- ◆ Unexplained injuries (which may indicate violence from others and/or self-harming), refusing medical help
- ◆ Abusing drugs and/or alcohol
- ◆ Gangs will often have profiles on social or networking websites like Facebook or Twitter, so look out for sudden changes to their profile and/or use of slang/derogatory language.

Please note this list is not exhaustive, you should always seek advice if you are concerned.

What can you do?

It is important to remember that you are not to blame, criminal groups exploit the young, the vulnerable and those that are within easy reach. No matter how confident or secure you may feel the child in your care is, the group will present themselves as whatever is missing, or with what the child wants or feels that they need.

However, once they have them, often their treatment of your child will change to coercion, bullying and exploitation.

For these reasons it's important to remember that the child is just as much a victim and there **are** things you can do to help stop your child from being involved or to help them get out.

Here's some helpful tips

- ◆ Talk to your child and listen – you are looking for open, honest and non-judgemental communication without anger
- ◆ Encourage them to get involved in positive activities and to think about their future and employment
- ◆ Get involved in your child's school activities
- ◆ Know your child's friends and their families
- ◆ Always know where your child is and who they are with
- ◆ Help them to cope with pressure and how to deal with conflict without the use of violence
- ◆ Speak to them about the serious consequences of violent or illegal behaviour
- ◆ Help them to understand the dangers of being in a gang and find alternative constructive ways to use their time
- ◆ Keep lines of communication open
- ◆ Be aware of what your child is doing on the internet
- ◆ Look for ways of disciplining children that do not involve harshness, anger or violence
- ◆ Work with other parents and schools to watch their behaviour
- ◆ Contact local voluntary organisations that provide mentoring and other support for young people
- ◆ Talk about your child's behaviour with their school and other parents

If you suspect your child is already involved

Remember that they may not want to talk about it or may be scared. The vast majority of the young people we work with have been victims too. It is important that they know you want to listen and support them. Make sure they know they have a choice.

Stay calm

Ask questions, but listen too. Don't be afraid of confrontation, but try not to approach them with anger and accusations. Try to understand the situation from their point of view and why they have joined the gang. Ask them what you can do to help. Try to agree on what they should do next. Work with them to find solutions and choices.

Seek help from local community organisations or youth services

They can offer specialist support and programmes to help them leave the gang. (See useful contacts on back page.) Contact local support networks such as faith groups or neighbourhood police officers connected to your local school.

