



# TACKLING COUNTY LINES

## ASK US ABOUT COUNTY LINES

FGR Community has teamed up with Resilience UnLimited to raise awareness of this important issue. We hope the information below is helpful.

If you have any questions about gang or county lines activity or if you are worried that someone you know may be involved in gangs or is at risk of harm from serious youth crime and violence, you can contact the team at Resilience UnLimited for advice and support.

The Resilience UnLimited team work in close partnership with the National Centre for Gangs Research at the University of West London and will try to answer any questions you have. When it comes to safeguarding young people, there is no such thing as a 'silly' question.

Email – [info@resilienceprogramme.co.uk](mailto:info@resilienceprogramme.co.uk) or via the Resilience UnLimited website's contact page at <https://resilienceprogramme.co.uk>

For feedback on these webpages or any of the services linked to our Tackling County Lines initiative, please visit - <https://resilienceprogramme.co.uk/how-are-we-doing>

### WHAT ARE 'COUNTY LINES'?

Inner city gangs have evolved and are now expanding their drug dealing markets from big cities like London, Birmingham and Manchester to smaller rural towns in order to make more money. Over the last 10 years, inner-city drugs markets have become saturated and overcompetitive. Increased competition between street gangs led to more gang-related violence as gangs compete over post-codes and territory but this has also led to new drug dealing networks developing between the cities and more rural areas, known as 'County Lines'. The 'lines' refer to the mobile phone lines that are used by the gang members to market and sell their drugs.

### WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON RURAL AREAS LIKE STROUD VALLEY AND GLOUCESTERSHIRE?

The National Crime Agency warned in 2019 that there were approximately 2,500 county line drug networks operating across England and Wales. With a strong recent focus on interrupting the new drugs markets by police forces and the NCA, the NCA now estimate that the number has reduced to around 2,000. But new lines are often being set up as quickly as old ones are interrupted.

**Rural communities are now experiencing the impact of gang and county lines activity, with drug dealing and crime increasing to levels previously not experienced before. This includes:**

- Increased crime levels – including drug dealing, street robbery and knife crime.
- Young people being exploited, coaxed into gang activity with the promise of free fast food, quick money, designer clothes and protection. These are just myths with many young people instead



find themselves suffering debt bondage, bullying, threats of violence and increased levels of stress, anxiety and mental health problems caused by relentless 24/7 gang activity.

- Young people also arming themselves as a means of taking back control or self-defence. This in turn is contributing to increased knife violence in communities. Statistics show that a young person's prospects of becoming a victim of knife crime are increased by knife carrying.
- Vulnerable groups (including homeless people, people with mental health needs and young people in looked after settings) being exploited before they realise what they are getting involved in. Vulnerable people's homes are 'cuckooed' as a cheap, convenient 'trap house' for gang dealers.
- Increase in child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse – gangs use grooming and coercion tactics targeting children as young as 12, young women and looked after children, who are trafficked and exploited to work moving (and storing) drugs and drug money, selling drugs or sex. Sexual exploitation is a common feature of young women's experiences of gangs. While young women have been affected by gangs for years, they can often be overlooked.

## A WORD ON KNIFE CARRYING

Most young people (99%) living in England and Wales, do so knife-free. The small minority who carry a knife often claim that it feels safer. But the opposite is true. Statistics show that carrying a knife for protection puts a young person at greater risk of being stabbed themselves.

Even if a young person avoids becoming involved in violence, there are other major consequences that can follow from knife carrying. If a young person is stopped by the police and found to be carrying a knife, that could result in a conviction for knife carrying, which can itself carry a sentence of up to four years in prison. Claiming self-defence, is no defence. After four years, a criminal record can follow that young person for the rest of their life affecting employment prospects and ability to travel to certain countries.

### **If you, or someone you know is under pressure to carry a knife:**

- Avoid peer pressure and 'friends' who encourage knife carrying.
- Become more aware of where you live and how to avoid situations and places where they are more likely to result in conflict or violence.
- Choose positive alternatives to knife carrying and violence by channelling time and energy into safer activities in less dangerous situations, among others living knife free.

## SPOTTING THE SIGNS

**The signs someone you know may be involved in County Lines activity might include:**

- They become withdrawn from their family;
- They may have a sudden loss of interest in school or change in behaviour at school. You may see a drop in attendance or academic achievement.
- Starting to secretly use a second mobile phone, usually a basic non-smart phone;
- Starting to use new or unknown slang words linked to gangs or the street;
- Keeping unexplained amounts of money or possessions;
- Staying out unusually late without a good reason;



- Dropping out of usual positive activities especially one they have done for some time;
- Unexplained physical injuries and despite being injured or unwell, they may refuse to receive medical treatment for injuries;
- Constantly talking about another young person who seems to have a lot of influence over them;
- Breaking off with old friends and hanging around with just one group of people;
- Going missing;
- Being found by the police in towns or cities many miles from their home;
- Seeming to be scared when entering certain areas.
- The more signs there are, usually the stronger the likelihood.

## **WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU'RE WORRIED SOMEONE YOU KNOW MAY BE INVOLVED?**

You should talk to that person at the earliest opportunity. It can be a daunting conversation but remember they may be scared or unwilling to talk about it. An important feature of County Lines involvement is that the more heavily a child is involved with a gang, the less likely they are to talk about it.

### **The following advice might help you:**

- It is critical that they know that you care, you want to listen and support them;
- County Lines are hierarchical and often younger children can find that they are unintentionally coerced into taking part in gang activity and they become victims themselves. As a victim, speaking up early can be a powerful thing;
- You should try to stay calm no matter how upset or angry you are – this is easier said than done but is also crucial to a successful outcome;
- Try to ask questions, rather than making rash accusations;
- Listen carefully to what they say without interrupting them;
- Tell them it's OK to say 'no' to requests that make them feel uncomfortable and point out that it can actually build respect and stop continual peer pressure or unwanted attention;
- Try to understand the situation from their point of view and why they have joined the gang;
- Don't take any explanation personally and try not to become defensive;
- Ask what you, your friends and wider family can do to help – try to come up with a joint solution together. Young people are more likely to stick to a plan, if they have been involved in shaping it;
- Carefully point out the risks and consequences of carrying drugs, knives or guns (or even storing or hiding them for others). More information is available or at <https://resilienceprogramme.co.uk/faqs>
- Try to find positive alternatives to involvement in gang or County Lines activity. There are some suggestions in our Community Directory at <https://resilienceprogramme.co.uk/sos-directory>



## **IN AN EMERGENCY**

**If you, or someone else, is in immediate danger call the police on 999. For anyone needing urgent emotional support, you can:**

- Call the Samaritans on **116 123** – their lines are open 24 hours a day.
- For confidential support or advice call Childline on **0800 1111** – their counsellors are there to talk about anything that may be worrying you. You can also get support through their website. Visit <https://www.childline.org.uk>

## **TO SAFEGUARD THE WELFARE OF A CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON INVOLVED IN COUNTY LINES**

If you have an urgent concern about the safety or welfare of a child or young person, you should contact:

### **Gloucestershire Children and Families Front Door**

Call 01452 426565 9am to 5pm

Call 01452 61 4194 outside office hours

Email [childrenshelpdesk@gloucestershire.gov.uk](mailto:childrenshelpdesk@gloucestershire.gov.uk)

Further information and advice on safeguarding in Gloucestershire can be found here at <https://www.gscb.org.uk>