County Lines

Data Analytics Lab

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2 Introduction

County Lines describes gangs and organised criminal networks involved in moving illegal drugs, often across police and local authority boundaries (although not exclusively), using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of "deal lines". They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons. – ("Home Office Serious Violence Strategy" 2018)

The *'County Line'* is the mobile phone line used to take the orders of drugs.

Although demand for and the supply of drugs underpins county lines offending, exploitation is integral to the business model. Offenders continue to recruit, transport and exploit vulnerable individuals, including children, to carry out low-level criminal activity essential to their operations.

Analysis of intelligence (IMS) logs indicates that cocaine, crack and heroin are the most frequently supplied drugs.

County lines offenders use mass marketing text messages to advertise the supply and availability of drugs. Offenders offer promotions such as two for one deals, free samples and other marketing initiatives. The offer of free samples in exchange for the contact details of potential customers is also used to expand the customer base within supply areas.

The use of social media varies across groups and individuals engaged in county lines offending. Although some offenders use social media both as a means of recruitment and in promoting their identity and brand and intimidating rival offenders, including when moving into new supply areas, others avoid social media in an effort to avoid identification.

Dealers frequently target children and young adults - often with mental health or addiction problems - to act as drug runners or move cash to stay under the radar of law enforcement. In some cases, dealers will take over a local property, normally belonging to a vulnerable person, and use it to operate their criminal activity from. This is known as *cuckooing*.

People exploited in this way will quite often be exposed to physical, mental and sexual abuse, and in some instances will be trafficked to areas a long way from home as part of the network's drug dealing business.

3   Project

3.1   Overview

The West Midlands is the second biggest 'exporter' of county lines to smaller towns and rural areas, with 9% of deal lines nationally originating in the West Midlands Police (WMP) area[1]. It is estimated that almost two-thirds of the wider region's organised crime groups (OCGs) are predominantly involved in drugs activity, some of which includes county lines and that the lines between urban street gangs (USGs) and OCGs are becoming more blurred, with USGs causing increasing harm.[2] The strong connection between drugs supply and firearms is evidenced in the West Midlands where the use of violence is common to both protect and enable criminal business interests.[3]

At present a small team of Intelligence professionals trawls multiple data systems using simple key word searches to manually identify drugs lines, those committing offences and those being exploited. WMP have various data systems for recording what we know about vulnerable children and adults who are potentially being exploited by gangs. This information could be recorded within an incident log, a crime report or an intelligence report submitted by an officer or based on third party information. WMP also record information about suspected exploitation when children are reported missing, or if they are suspected of committing an offence and further information about their situation comes to light through investigation. (Please see section xxx for further information about referral and safeguarding procedures). Since a range of offences and events could indicate exploitation, identifying and collating data relating to county lines is a challenging task and it is acknowledged that there are significant intelligence gaps. For example, WMP have a list of children who are believed to be victims of county lines exploitation, but cannot link them to a specific gang or drugs line. This prevents WMP from pursuing enforcement activity against those who are involved in their exploitation.

Around 50 drugs lines had been identified by WMP in the first 6 months of 2020 and reported via national reporting mechanisms to the NCA. These are assessed against a number of factors, including where the deal line originates, which areas it impacts, whether children are known to be exploited, whether the gang has a firearms capability, whether children associated with the line are known to have 'missing' episodes and whether they are a looked after child (LAC); the number and ages of those involved at the lowest level of the organisation (such as runners); the levels of violence associated with the gang and whether the group is a known OCG. Those lines assessed as posing the greatest risk to the vulnerable, where there is credible intelligence to suggest that

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[1] NCA Intelligence Assessment (2019) *County Lines Drugs Supply, Vulnerability and Harm 2018* https://nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/257-county-lines-drug-supply-vulnerability-and-harm-2018/file

[2] OPCC SPCB Report SOC and ROCU Nov 2019 (item 9b) https://www.westmidlands-pcc.gov.uk/strategic-policing-crime-board/agendas-minutes-reports/

[3] OPCC SPCB Report SOC and ROCU Nov 2019 (item 9b); *Commission on Gangs and Violence: Uniting to improve safety Summary Report 2017* https://www.westmidlands-pcc.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Gangs-and-Violence-Commission-Summary-Report.pdf?x56534

exploitation is taking place, are prioritised for further intelligence development to support investigations.

This project is not designed to replace intelligence tasks looking at county lines in granular detail on a daily basis; but to enhance existing intelligence processes described above and ensure that senior officers direct teams to focus their intelligence development on the most harmful county lines gangs. Where new lines are identified they will be referred to the ROCU and NCA via existing national reporting mechanisms.

The purpose of this project is to identify county lines networks across the WMP area which are linked to known criminal networks.

The project seeks to:

• Identify key networks and nominals who are linked to county lines.

• Identify and prioritise the greatest threat and risk posed by these individuals from an exploitation perspective to direct enhanced intelligence development.

• Build on the Serious Organised Crime (SOC) Network project with an emphasis on county lines. This will require identifying nominals involved with county lines, comparing this to the SOC Network as well as assessing the linkages between nominals who currently have not been identified within the SOC Network project.

The intention of this project is to provide a strategic understanding of which county lines are generating the greatest harm and the extent to which they overlap with other serious organised crime networks. The output will identify those groups and individuals which are causing the greatest harm to vulnerable individuals and communities. This will enable the Intelligence Department to focus its resources on developing intelligence assessments on the most harmful groups so that enforcement activity can be undertaken to dismantle them[4].

Where children, previously unknown, are identified as potentially being exploited (even where they appear in our data as an 'offender') the usual safeguarding arrangements will be adhered to (see section 8 in the appendix).

3.2 Data Sources

Crimes, IMS, ICIS, PINS, Compact

• PINS is software used by almost every police service in the UK. It collects prison and police data from a variety of key sources and automatically cross-references and links historic and current prisoner records on a daily basis. It notifies law enforcement agencies of forthcoming prison releases to assist offender managers as offenders re-enter the community.

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[4] For more detail on "dismantling", see the report "An Analysis of Serious and Organised Crime Networks". However, this means that if some of the nominals within a network were to cease their criminal activities, these networks would cease to operate as effectively and so lead to the reduction in the harm they generate within the West Midlands.

- COMPACT is software used by law enforcement and local authorities to record and manage cases of children and adults who are reported missing (this system contains some useful data relating to missing persons who later in life are linked to CL groups).

- Crimes, IMS (intelligence logs) and ICIS (custody records) are WMP internal systems.

Date used is from 2015 - present.

4   Methodology

4.1 Network Identification

We build on the SOC Network project with an emphasis on county lines. This is based on identifying nominals involved with county lines, and comparing this to the SOC Network as well as assessing the linkages between nominals who currently have not been identified within the SOC Network project.

To identify nominals involved with county lines we mimic the manual keyword searches used by the intelligence team to trawl the key data sources of crime records, intelligence reports (including in relation to prisoners being released), custody records, and missing persons. The search criteria combine multiple regular expressions to determine a provisional probability that a data row refers to a county line offence. For example a crime row containing the phrase "COUNTY LINE" has a provisional weighting of 1. (See table appendix 1)

- Nominals related to an identified row are "connected" and included in a provisional network with a weighting based on matching search terms. (The weighting is additive over all of the found search terms with an upper limit of 1).

- The provisional network is "deepened" by including all relationships to the provisionally included set of nominals (this could include potentially adversarial associations). Missing persons data is used to ascertain any information of relevance to vulnerable people who may be involved with county lines.

- Weightings are propagated through the network. Firstly giving each nominal a provisional individual weighting based on the number and weight of connections to other nominals. Followed by propagating the average nominal weighting to the connection.

- Nominals with less than a 50% weighting are discarded from the network (which results on nominals loosely connected with a CL group being discarded).

4.2 Nominal Groupings

The grouping structure between nominals is identified by applying the random walk algorithm of Pascal Pons and Matthieu Latapy (2011)[5]. See the network below.

- The overlap with the SOC network is calculated based on common nominals between the CL groupings and the SOC groupings.

- If there is a greater than 50% overlap, the group is labelled as associated with the SOC grouping.

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[5] See the reference for details, however the identification of networks within the collection of linked individuals is based upon the distance between the probabilities of membership of various groups.

County Lines Groupings
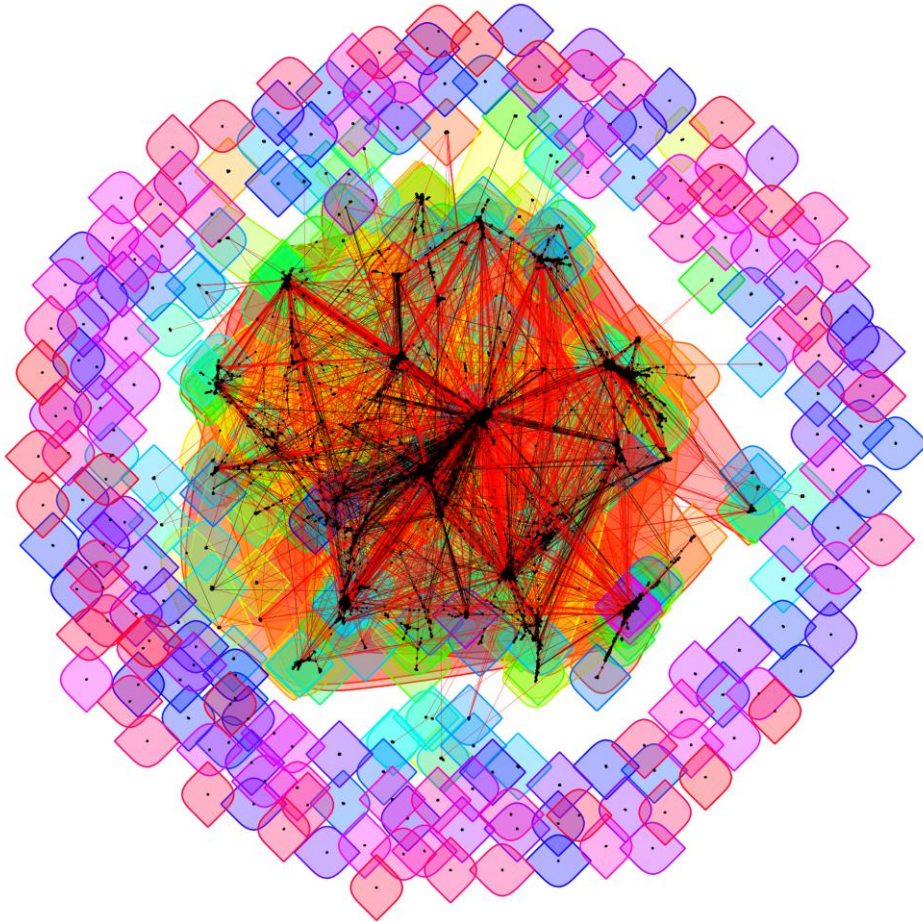
About the diagram,

- Each shape indicates a detected grouping based on the number and weight of connections between individuals. The colour has no meaning, it is intended to disambiguate groupings.

- The groups around the outside of the main cluster are not linked to the main body of the network. There is intelligence to suggest CL activity, but these individuals are not themselves linked to other individuals.

Essentially, those individuals in the centre of the diagram have been linked to a county lines network, with the networks having been delineated by way of how close linked individuals are to a group of other individuals compared to other groups of individuals.

5   Project Output

The previously developed SOC network Qlik Dashboard has been augmented to include a layer for the county lines network. This dashboard has functionality to:

1. Review nominals involved in county lines
2. Review missing persons data involved with county lines.
3. Ascertain overlaps between this network and the SOC network previously developed.
4. Show the harm related to county lines nominals and groupings using both the Cambridge Crime Harm Index (CCHI) and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Crime Severity Index.[6]
5. Show a measure of centrality for nominals.
6. Show a prioritisation scheme suitable for the use of Intelligence professionals in assessing the extent of networks and the degree of harm produced by them. This is calculated using the same method as the SOC project. Please refer to the Operating Principles for further information about how the tool will be used by the department.
7. Display a dismantling prioritisation scheme for individual nominals.

Dismantling groups means that if some of the members of the network ceased their criminal activities, the network would cease to operate as effectively and so lead to the reduction of harm created by criminal activity within society. Ceasing their activities could be by way of sentencing through the criminal justice system, by way of offender management processes or, potentially, of their own volition, etc. The algorithm used allows for the identification of those nominals who, if they were to cease their activities, would lead to the breaking up of the network most efficiently.

This means that, based on harm generated, the various groups can be prioritised in terms of the tasking of relevant WMP activities and within those groups, the nominals identified via the algorithm could also be prioritised.

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[6] Both the Cambridge Crime Harm Index [Sherman, L.W. How to Count Crime: the Cambridge Harm Index Consensus. *Cambridge Journal of Evidence Based Policing* (2020). https://doi.org/10.1007/s41887-020-00043-2] and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Severity Scores
[https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/crimeseverityscoreexperimentalstatistics]
are used within the analyses.

6 APPENDIX

6.1 County Lines search terms

Search terms and weightings used during the provisional network build.

The weightings and search terms are based on current searches used by the intelligence team. In addition, text mining was used to discover the proportion of times the search terms appeared in crime logs manually marked with a county lines special interest marker (the weights were ascertained via speaking with subject matter experts and iterative checking on the returns to queries using these expressions).

Search Grouping	Provision Weighting	Matching Rows included in Network	Matching Rows not in Network	Search terms
CL WORDS	0.7	6	0	"CLMIDDLE", "CLCRACK", "CLILLICIT", "CLRECRUIT"
COUNTY LINE	1	8272	0	COUNTY LINE
CUCKOO	0.5	208	0	"CUCKOOED", "CUCKOO HOUSE", "CUCKOO FLAT", "CUCKOO PROPERTY"
DRUGS LINE	0.4	1036	4363	DRUGS LINE
MISPER	0.1	1645	23713	MISPER, MISSING PERSON
OTHER	0.1	864	4211	RUNNER, RUNNING DRUG, PWITS, POSSESSION WITH INTENT
Drug words				
COCAINE		1225	68314	
CRACK		1020	40729	
HEROIN		962	37640	
WEED		684	37755	
SMACK		43	7309	
OTHER		251	23601	

The search terms also include common drug words (see full list is here: https://www.addictioncenter.com/drugs/drug-street-names/).

6.1.1 Sensitivity / Specificity.

In a random sample of 100 rows from IMS and CRIMES that resulted in relationships added to the network, a manual check showed that all rows included were related to county lines with no false positives. A 95% credible lower bound on the sensitivity of the selection process is 97%.

In a random sample of 100 rows not included in the network but including search terms used to build the network. Two rows indicated some *county lines* activity. A 95% credible lower bound on the specificity of the selection process is 93%.

(These bounds are based on calculating credible bounds for the true number of false positives, and false negatives based on hypergeometric sampling of 100 rows).

7 References

"Home Office Serious Violence Strategy." 2018. *GOV.UK*. UK Home Office; GOV.UK.
        https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-violence-strategy.

Pons, Pascal, and Matthieu Latapy. 2011. "Post-Processing Hierarchical Community Structures: Quality
        Improvements and Multi-Scale View." *Theoretical Computer Science* 412 (8-10). Elsevier: 892–
        900.

8   Overview of Referrals and Safeguarding

The purpose of this section is to address the concerns raised by the Data Ethics Committee about operationalising the network analyses produced by the Data Analytics Lab (DAL). These concerns are about how we respond to children and other vulnerable people who are identified as being involved in Serious Organised Crime (SOC), Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and County Lines (CL) as a result of the analyses. The key areas of concern raised by the Committee include:

- That there is a risk of inadvertently or unfairly criminalising children.
- Being assured that there is a comprehensive and credible plan for how victims of exploitation are safeguarded and supported.
- A recognition that the victim/perpetrator overlap can be complex.
- How data about individuals is shared with partners for safeguarding purposes.
- Better understanding of prevention strategies.

Children and other vulnerable people are likely to be identified as a result of analyses undertaken by the DAL. This includes the various network analyses identifying people linked to SOC, CL and CSE. Please see the '*Operating Principles for Network Analyses'* for an explanation of how the DAL's output feeds into existing Intelligence Department processes.

These analyses use data science techniques which are new to law enforcement, to understand the criminal environment. However, any children, or other individuals identified as vulnerable to exploitation, will be safeguarded using West Midlands Police (WMP) standard operating procedures in partnership with other local statutory bodies. These procedures operate regardless of the vulnerable individual's status within our recording systems as a 'victim', 'suspect' or 'defendant'.

8.1 Statutory Guidance: Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018)[7]

WMP and other partners across the region are bound by legislation which is summarised in the 2018 statutory guidance, '*Working together to safeguard children*'.

> *This guidance focuses on the core legal requirements, making it clear what individuals, organisations and agencies must and should do to keep children safe. In doing so, it seeks to emphasise that effective safeguarding is achieved by putting children at the centre of the system and by every individual and agency playing their full part. This child centred approach is fundamental to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of every child. A child centred approach means keeping the child in focus when making decisions about their lives and working in partnership with them and their families.*

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[7] HM Government, (2018) *Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/942454/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_inter_agency_guidance.pdf

In particular, the Children Act 2004, as amended by the Children and Social Work Act 2017, strengthened the relationship between the police, clinical commissioning groups (CCG) and the local authority (LA) who are duty-bound to work together, and with other partners locally, to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in their area.

WMP works with seven LAs (Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall and Wolverhampton) and their associated CCGs.

8.2 Modern Slavery Act 2015

Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act (MSA) 2015 created a defence for victims who commit certain offences when they are compelled to do so (in the case of adults) or when they commit them as a direct consequence of being a victim of slavery / exploitation, if a reasonable person, in the same situation with the same 'relevant characteristics' would do the relevant act (in the case of children). [8]   The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) adopts a four-stage assessment when deciding whether to prosecute a suspect who might be such a victim, in order to establish whether investigators have used the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in the case of trafficking or slavery; or have considered whether a child has committed crimes arising directly from Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE).   A person who is shown to have been exploited will rarely be considered for prosecution.

8.3 Safeguarding arrangements in the West Midlands

WMP's increased focus on tackling Serious Organised Crime and Exploitation (SOCEx) is underpinned by the newly formed SOCEx Hubs in Birmingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton which include an uplift in the numbers of officers and staff dedicated to this issue. The Hubs provide a single interface for partners to engage with, rather than navigating different WMP teams which deal with missing people, gangs or CSE. Equally, officers become the WMP experts in the prevention strategies available in each local area. This offers improved opportunities for child centred safeguarding conversations and a consistent approach to safeguarding from WMP.

Each LA works differently with their unique structures, terminology and range of interventions. Birmingham has a well-developed multi-agency contextual safeguarding[9] hub (MASH), which includes WMP officers from several departments including the Public Protection Unit (PPU), Force Criminal Investigations Department (FCID), Force Intelligence and Neighbourhood teams. They are co-located with partner agencies including Birmingham Children's Trust, health, education, Barnardo's, Youth Offending Services and the Children's Society. Wolverhampton is building a similar partnership hub, although WMP officers are not yet embedded. Other LAs are at different points in their development but all are moving in the direction of building a safeguarding hub similar to that established in Birmingham. Regardless of current progress, each has a MASH for referrals and some have local daily briefings which are attended by WMP officers.

The strengthening relationship between the WMP SOCEx Hubs and LA MASH arrangements ensures WMP investigations go beyond simply investigating specific offences (such as

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[8] https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/human-trafficking-smuggling-and-slavery

[9] Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families. It recognises that the different relationships that young people form in their neighbourhoods, schools and online can feature violence and abuse. Parents and carers have little influence over these contexts, and young people's experiences of extra-familial abuse can undermine parent-child relationships. https://contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/

possession with intent to supply drugs or 'PWITS'). Instead, they take a contextual safeguarding approach and consider that a child is being exploited, even if the child has made no such disclosures. A key aspect of the investigators' role in the SOCEx Hubs is to identify opportunities NOT to criminalise children. Indeed, the Force's Investigation Policy [10] states that the core mission of West Midlands Police is to prevent crime, protect the public and help those in need. The overwhelming principle is that, '*staff should treat every investigation as an opportunity to intervene and prevent future offending*' and that WMP, '*will seek every opportunity to work collaboratively with partners to prevent offending*'. To this end, the Force uses the new Home Office Counting Rule (HOCR) Outcome 22 for investigations where no further action is taken but diversionary, educational or intervention activity has been undertaken to address offending behaviour or prevent further offending.[11] This is recognised as a 'positive' outcome to increase the use of 'behaviour change' early interventions.[12]

The Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) funds partners who can assist WMP in identifying these opportunities to prevent future offending and to support those being exploited. It has funded Trauma Informed training, delivered by Barnardo's, for many of WMP's partners across social services, education, family hubs and the voluntary sector. For example, trauma informed volunteers from the charity St. Giles[13] take referrals from custody staff in Coventry to provide peer mentors with lived experience to support vulnerable young people. The ambition is to provide bespoke Trauma Informed training for WMP as an organisation and for specific roles such as custody staff.[14]

In Birmingham, where there is cause for concern about a child, for example if they have been arrested, a referral will be made to the MASH. If appropriate, the Exploitation Screening Tool will be completed and if they are assessed as being at high risk a Strategy discussion will be convened and initial safeguarding considered. If the child is assessed as medium or low risk, their case is reviewed the following day at the daily Contextual Safeguarding meeting. Cases assessed as medium risk go to a Disruption Panel; whilst low risk cases are monitored. These procedures are all governed by tight timescales to ensure prompt action is taken. Where opportunities for disruption are identified the Disruption Panel will explore the Home Office 'Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit'.[15]

It should be noted that information for vulnerable adults is not automatically shared with partner agencies, since their consent is required. This means the ability to identify offenders involved in criminal exploitation of vulnerable adults is the first step towards gathering evidence to build a case which does not require victim support to progress the investigation.

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[10] West Midlands Police Investigation Policy Ref CRIME/08; approved 23/02/2021
[11] Home Office Counting Rules for Recorded Crime (HOCR): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/977232/count-general-apr-2021.pdf Outcome 22 came into use in April 2020.
[12] West Midlands Police Outcome 22 Policy Ref CRIME/07; approved 26/01/2021.
[13] https://www.stgilestrust.org.uk/what-we-do/child-criminal-exploitation/hospital-custody-suites/
[14] Conversation with Ben Curtis, Barnardo's. Ambition is dependent on funding decisions from Home Office.
[15] HM Government (2019) '*Child exploitation disruption toolkit*' https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-exploitation-disruption-toolkit