

County Lines after COVID - a new threat?

Tuesday 19 May 2020

Since the COVID-19 lockdown began, the received wisdom [reported in the media](#) has been that the threat from county lines operated by organised crime groups (OCGs) and gangs would reduce.

However, the picture appears to be far more complex. The gangs who operate county lines have always proven highly versatile and adaptable, and they are now embracing new tactics to protect a lucrative business.

Significant reductions in the number of children reported missing from home or care have been cited as evidence that exploitation through county lines has reduced due to the lockdown. On the surface this makes sense, as it seems obvious that exploitation of vulnerable children and in county lines drugs networks may be easier to disrupt during the COVID-19 lockdown due to increased visibility of young people in public spaces or on public transport.

However, there are several reasons that this should be treated with caution.

Lower volume does not necessarily mean lower vulnerability

Some boroughs are reporting a noticeable increase in the length of missing episodes during lockdown, possibly because young people transported to trap houses are having to stay there for longer due to increased demand and lockdown restrictions.

Firstly, children go missing from home or care for a variety of different reasons. They may want to spend time with a girlfriend or boyfriend, they may argue with their parents or carers. If they are in the care system, they may run away from their placement and return to their home area. The real issue is whether the young people who have been assessed as being vulnerable to exploitation are still going missing - and here the picture is more mixed.

Rescue Response (a London based county lines service funded by MOPAC), have been collating intelligence from a variety of partners. Some London boroughs have reported to the Rescue Response project that although the number of missing children has dropped significantly since the start of the lockdown, many of the most vulnerable young people are still going missing.

Some boroughs are also reporting a noticeable increase in the length of missing episodes during lockdown, possibly because young people transported to trap houses are having to stay there for longer due to increased demand and lockdown restrictions.

This is consistent with data shared with Crest by an inner London borough. That borough's 'missing' data shows thirteen children reported missing since the lockdown began, compared with 39 children in March alone in 2019. These thirteen children are between the ages of 14 and 17 years old; eight are in care, four are children in need - just one has no social care status. Eight of the children have known links to gangs, eight have 'tags' for exploitation, seven have prior involvement in serious youth violence, and five have known links to county lines. This shows that although the number of children going missing is indeed far lower,

those who are still going missing are some of the most vulnerable in that borough. The number of children missing in that borough was lowest in the first week of lockdown and highest in week four - suggesting that worryingly the ability of parents, carers and residential children's homes to 'hold the line' on lockdown has weakened over time.

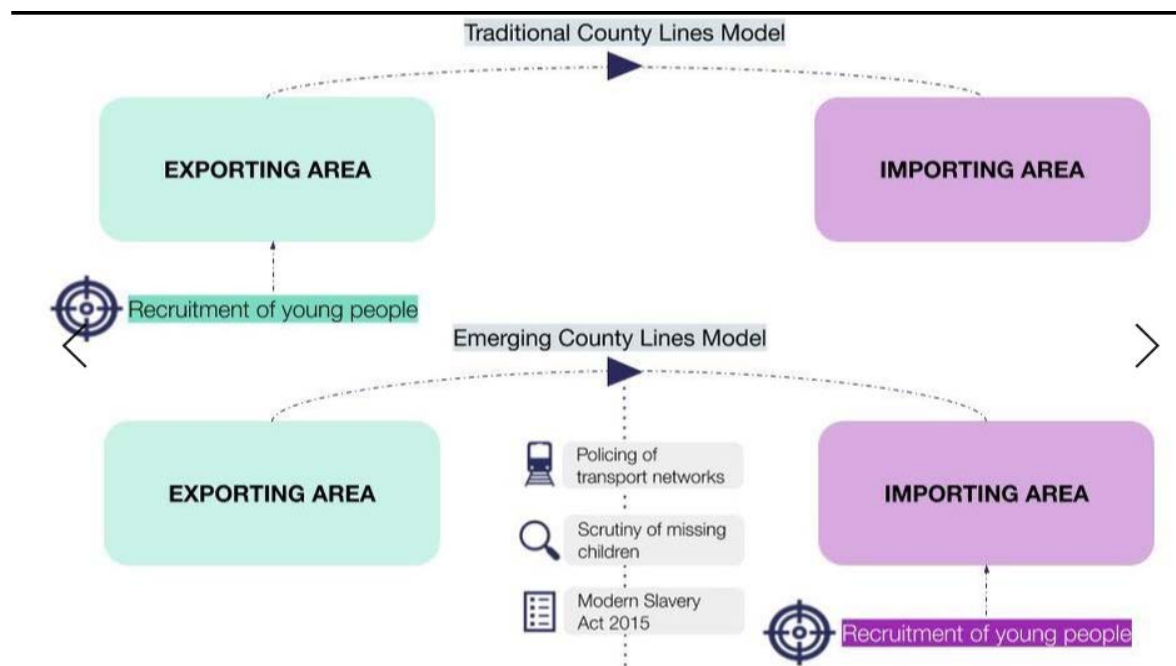
The trend towards local recruitment

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Secondly, in our [current research](#) for the Hadley Trust on the involvement of looked after children and children living in semi-independent accommodation in county lines, we have found a high level of consensus among practitioners and experts that OCGs and gangs are increasingly recruiting children who live locally to the dealing base, rather than children living in their urban bases who are then trafficked to the dealing bases.

Police tactics, such as use of automatic number plate recognition, operations by British Transport Police on the rail network and heightened scrutiny of missing children from 'exporting' urban local authorities, has constrained the ability of gangs to transport young people hundreds of miles with drugs, money and weapons. The use of modern slavery legislation against elder gang members has given them a stronger incentive to create greater distance between themselves and the dealing bases in their county lines.

Traditional and Emerging County Lines Models

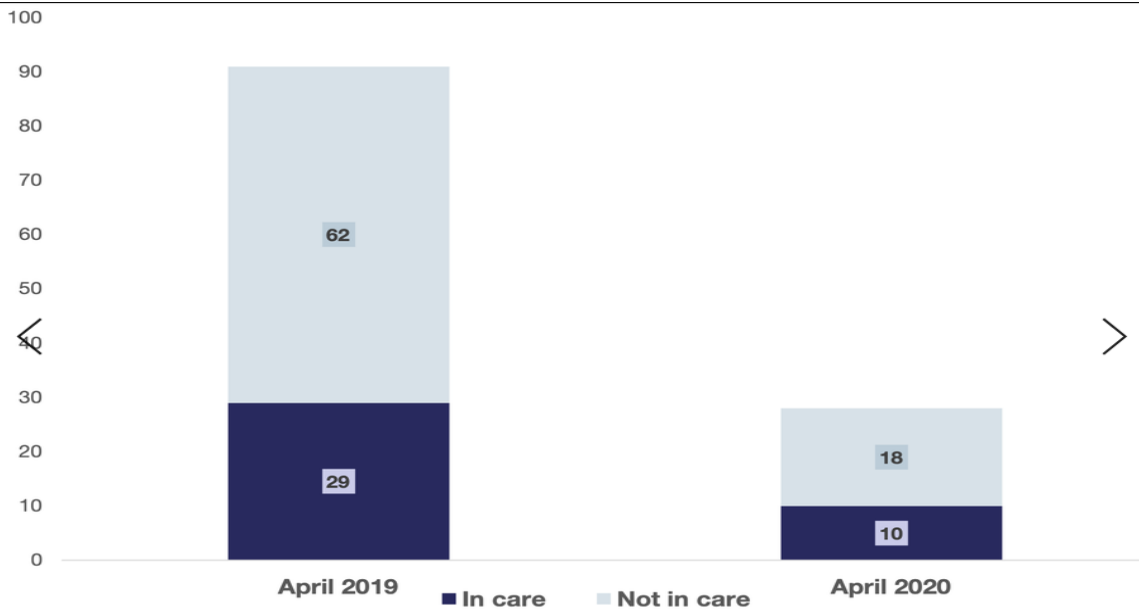


The recruitment of young people in the market towns and seaside towns targeted for county lines, through peer-to-peer approaches or social media advertising and through urban gangs working more closely with local gangs, was already transforming the traditional county lines model into something more like a local franchise operation in the pre-COVID world. Milton Keynes, Ipswich and the Medway towns were early victims of this local recruitment method, with postcode gangs of the type seen in London boroughs a decade ago forming around these networks.

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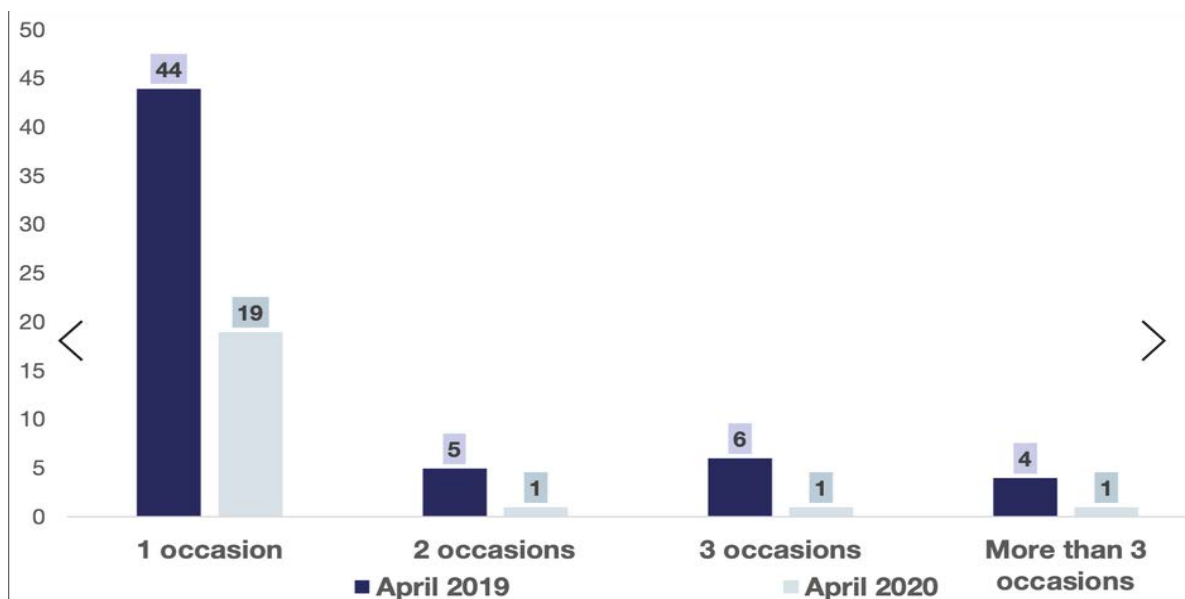
'Importing areas' for county lines are seeing similar patterns of reductions in missing children. Comparing the data from April 2019 and April 2020 in North Wales shows a dramatic change, with a reduction of two thirds in the number of missing children and only one child reported missing twice or more, with few missing incidents lasting more than 48 hours.

Number of missing incidents involving children in North Wales (April 2019/2020 comparison) broken down by care status



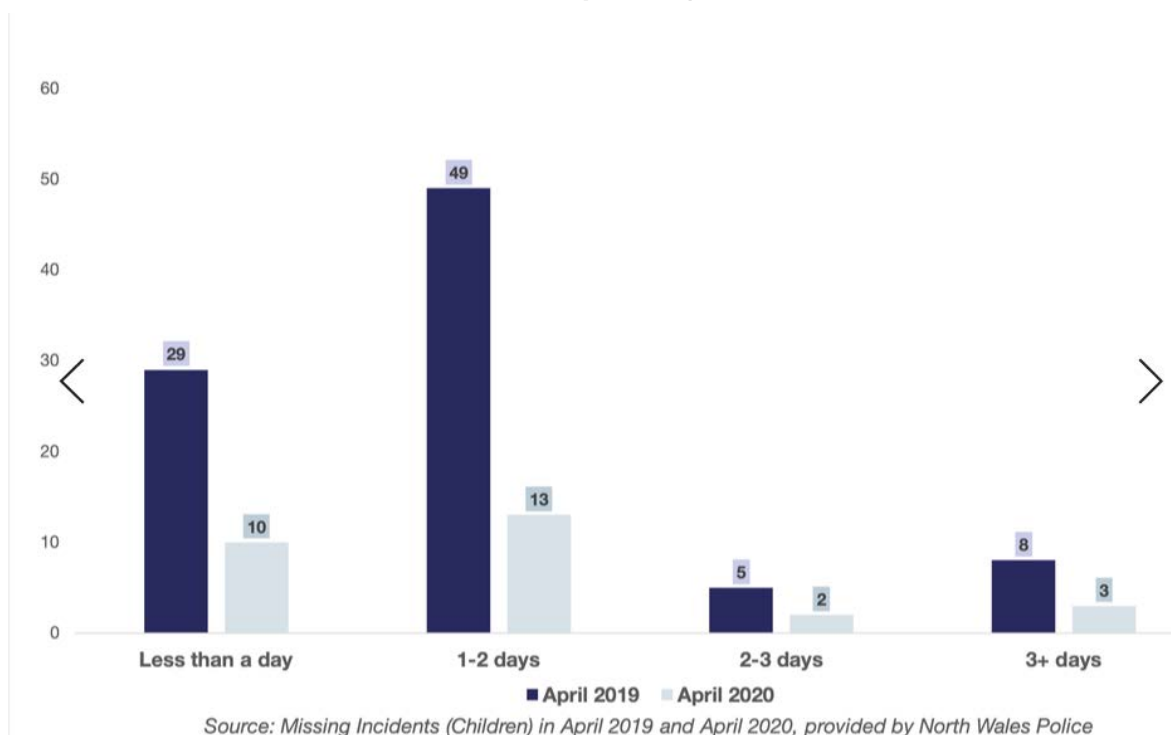
Source: Missing Incidents (Children) in April 2019 and April 2020, provided by North Wales Police

Number of occasions where a child went missing in North Wales (April 2019/2020 comparison)



Source: Missing Incidents (Children) in April 2019 and April 2020, provided by North Wales Police

Length of missing incidents (days) involving children in North Wales (April 2019/2020 comparison)



Young people are also being provided with taxis via apps (such as Uber, Bolt and Kaptan) in order to make longer journeys. Taxis continue to be used by dealers and networks for deliveries.

However, local recruitment allows gangs to game the system because the young person they exploit is able to leave their home or care placement in the morning, sell drugs and return the same day, before they are officially reported missing. Workers at one leading charity in North Wales told us that their caseload of young people involved in county lines were predominantly from the local area, yet had been recruited by gangs based in Merseyside. Several national children's charities have advised us that the systems around children going missing from homes or care remain beset by weaknesses of which gangs are well aware.

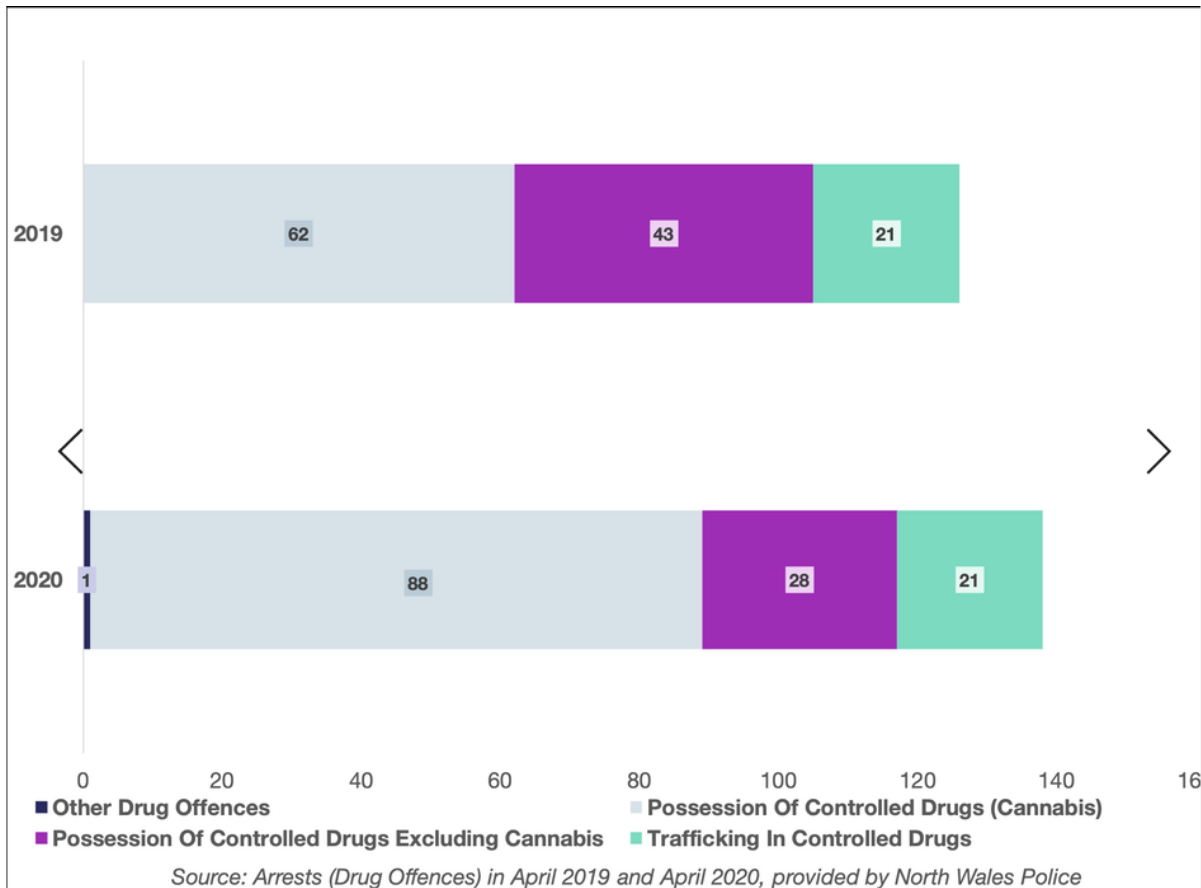
Rescue Response has received reports that gangs have redeployed runners previously used on county lines to deal within London instead. This may explain the overall reduction in reported missing episodes, despite continuing exploitation at a local level. Partners have reported that young people are being provided with taxis via apps (such as Uber, Bolt and Kaptan) in order to make longer journeys. Taxis continue to be used by dealers and networks for deliveries.

A buoyant drugs market

Thirdly, whilst the missing incidents figures for North Wales show even steeper reductions than those in London, the data shows only a slight fall in recorded drugs offences, suggesting that the local drug market is still functioning largely uninterrupted. Though demand for needle and syringe clinics fell sharply at the end of March in North Wales, when lockdown policies were first introduced, it has since risen back towards usual levels.

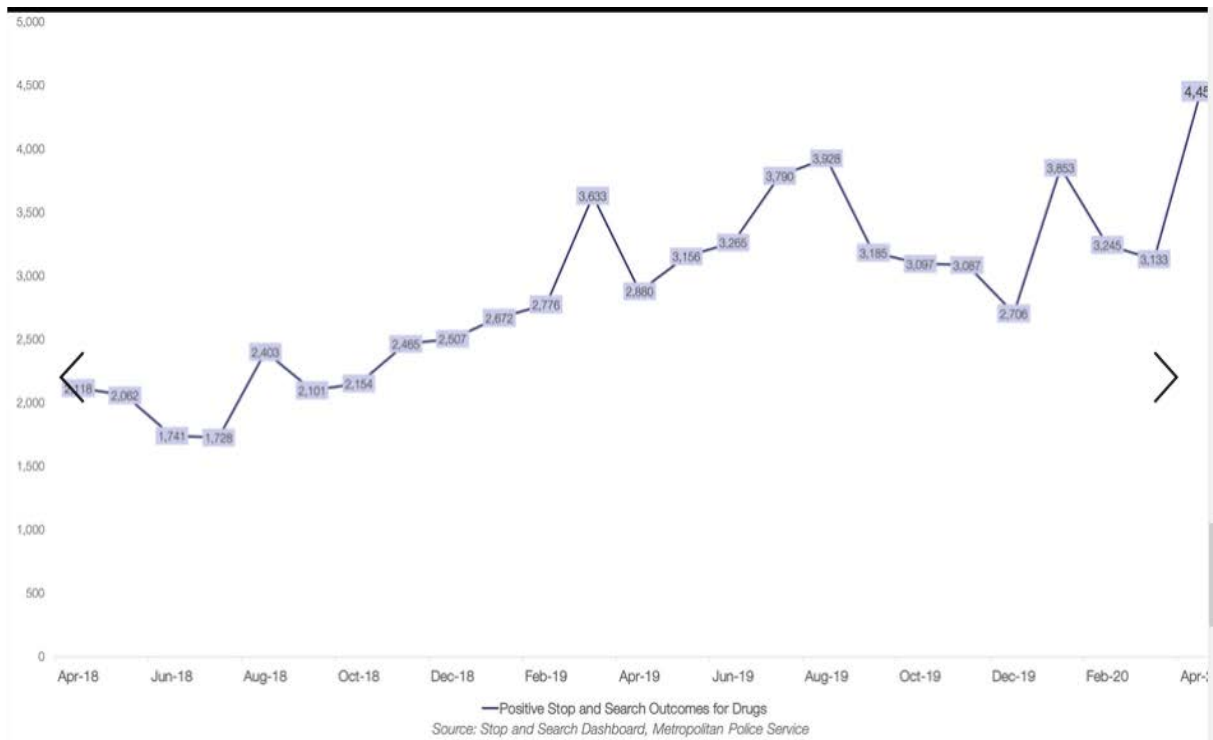
Given that there is still demand for Class A drugs - and that by retreating from the market, even temporarily, gangs risk ceding territory to rival groups - those who operate lucrative county lines will naturally seek to change the patterns of recruitment and exploitation and embrace new methods of transport, distribution and retail rather than putting their drugs lines on furlough.

Number of drug offences in North Wales (April 2019/2020 comparison) broken down by offence type



In theory, the ban on non-essential travel should make it easier to spot children who are moving drugs across the country. There is some evidence to bear this out. More people and vehicles are being stopped by police, and the rapid drop in other forms of crime potentially [leaves more time for proactive work against dealers](#). Similarly, Metropolitan Police data shows an increase of 42 per cent in positive stop and search drug outcomes since March, showing perhaps both the buoyancy of the drugs market but also the increased visibility of offenders.

Positive stop and search outcomes for drugs in London



However, the market for illegal drugs in the UK is substantial (worth around £10bn a year). Given that there is still demand for Class A drugs - and that by retreating from the market, even temporarily, gangs risk ceding territory to rival groups - those who operate lucrative county lines will naturally seek to change the patterns of recruitment and exploitation and embrace new methods of transport, distribution and retail rather than putting their drugs lines on furlough.

Some have clearly been more successful than others. There are reports of senior gang members breaking cover, forced to get their hands dirty to maintain their business. British Transport Police have reported that they have been able to disrupt large numbers of young people on the rail network. This shows the desperation of some gangs to maintain their position and profits in the early days of lockdown. Forces such as West Midlands have also been using the opportunities lockdown has presented them with to make proactive [drug seizures](#).

Changes in tactics to navigate the lockdown

The charity Missing People, who have been engaging with the police in different regions since the lockdown began, have told us that there is evidence of increased drug dealing in 'liminal spaces' such as railway land, car parks and abandoned industrial buildings. The decreased visibility of young people involved in drug dealing may not paint the full picture.

Police and practitioners have told us that some gangs have revived 'old school' tactics such as employing user-dealers to navigate the lockdown. However, for obvious reasons, user-dealers are a notoriously unreliable and chaotic workforce, and it seems likely gangs will want to access their preferred young workforce once the lockdown ends.

Another tactic used by gangs in both county lines and local lines is 'stacking', whereby the drugs line will put out a 'burst' marketing message to their customers, telling them to be in a certain place at a certain time. Once a large group of customers has assembled, a dealer will arrive, on a bike or in a car, and complete a large number of deals. This is a risky tactic, as it

is highly visible and attracts attention from local people watching from their homes. The dealer must complete their business within a ten to fifteen minute window to avoid arrest. In a COVID-19 context, contact with large groups of dependent drug users presents an infection risk for both dealer and customer, as does the practice of dealers storing wraps in their mouths.

Practitioners also report gang elders responding to opportunities for grooming children by using exploited teenagers to recruit peers through the use of end-to-end encrypted apps such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram and more recently Wickr. The use of social media is already a core part of the county lines model, used to market the availability of drugs, recruit and groom young people and arrange deals. As the technology develops so too will the opportunities for exploitation, away from the eyes of law enforcement and social services.

A new operating model in post-COVID-19 County Lines?

Whilst many of the tactics and 'swerves' adopted by the OCGs and gangs who run county lines seem likely to be time-limited to the COVID-19 lockdown, others may endure, helping gangs to refine their model post-COVID 19. Our conversations with police, children's services practitioners and experts indicate that the lockdown is accelerating and refining the use of tactics and tools which allow older gang members to groom and exploit vulnerable young people and professionalise the marketing and distribution of their products - whilst also creating greater distance between themselves and the dealing bases. The money flows back up the line, whilst the risk travels downward.

Ever since county lines came to national prominence four years ago, it has seemed that the authorities have been one step behind the gangs, fighting the last war. Perhaps then, the most significant insights we can draw from the response of county lines to the lockdown is to focus on those elements that provide a line of sight towards the future patterns of exploitation post-COVID.

The shift in the consumer economy from the high street to online delivery for both food and consumer durable goods presents an opportunity for drug lines to operate covertly both in terms of resupplying local bases and delivering drugs to consumers. This has been a growing feature of the drug market over recent years and is likely to accelerate. Runners and dealers disguised as key workers and supermarket workers have been reported during lockdown, but the pre-COVID tactic of using fast food delivery drivers and white van drivers is likely to become increasingly important during and after COVID, allowing drugs lines to operate in plain sight.

If it is indeed true that the involvement of young people in county lines activity has temporarily declined, Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner for England, is surely right to warn that the lockdown is likely to increase children's vulnerability, with harmful medium and long-term consequences. Detection and disruption of traditional county lines tactics may be easier, but prevention is far more challenging under the lockdown.

There has been a reported surge in domestic abuse (which, [a recent report by the Victims Commissioner finds](#), is a significant risk factor in creating vulnerability that leads to future exploitation). As school attendance has a protective impact on vulnerable children, the fact that few are currently attending — though schools are still open to them — should set alarm bells ringing.

A major challenge is assessing how much is happening in silence, behind closed doors. Child protection referrals [have halved in some parts of the country](#). Police and third sector agencies have described their fears that some missing episodes are no longer being reported, because parents or carers are afraid of being fined for a breach of lockdown rules. For those who do still go missing, the safeguarding response (safe and well checks, return home interviews) is now carried out over the phone. This means that nobody external sees the state in which a child returns.

With a cohort of young people isolated, bored and impoverished by lockdown, there is a danger that as restrictions start to lift, gangs will find a new generation of recruits for a new, professionalised local franchise model of county lines. Can law enforcement and protective services for children respond to rapidly evolving models of exploitation through county lines? It will mean seamlessly sharing data across borders and agencies and disrupting grooming and criminality that has migrated from the streets to encrypted apps. It will also mean a radically new approach to prevention, working with schools, pupil referral units and providers of alternative provision for those outside of mainstream education.

In the next stage of our county lines research in North Wales and Merseyside, we will be looking at the role of looked after children and young people in semi-independent accommodation, placed at distance from their home areas, and the changing risks these vulnerable young people face in the new emerging model of localised county lines.