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ABSTRACT

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**Dr. Ben Brewster  
Grace Robinson**

Research Fellows with the University of Nottingham's Rights Lab

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There has been substantial media speculation (Gierson and Walker, 2020; Pidd, 2020; Tidy, 2020; Eastwood, Aldridge and Spicer, 2020), as well as reports by frontline practitioners (National Youth Agency, 2020; Wedlock and Molina, 2020), about the effects of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions on 'County Lines' drug distribution and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) in the UK. As the national lockdown limited peoples' capacity to move freely without creating suspicion, reports suggested the 'County Lines' distribution model which relies on the transportation of drugs and money between larger metropolitan and provincial or coastal areas had been 'disrupted' during the lockdown period (Calouri, 2020).

Reductions in the number of children being reported missing were initially taken as a sign that fewer children were being exploited through County Lines (Calouri, 2020). However, reports suggest that drug distribution networks have developed a variety of new approaches and tactics to avoid detection (Calouri, 2020; Saggars, 2020; Pidd, 2020) and youth justice, youth work and child protection practitioners have outlined concerns that lockdown restrictions may have increased the vulnerabilities of young people to being groomed into criminal exploitation including through 'County Lines' operations (National Youth Agency, 2020; Wedlock and Molina, 2020).

This paper will present interim findings from research that seeks to inform efforts to safeguard children and vulnerable adults from CCE, as the impacts of COVID-19 continue to unfold. Our core research question asks:

*What shifts in county lines offending patterns have occurred since the introduction of social distancing methods in response to COVID-19 in the UK, and what impacts have they had on efforts to detect, prevent and combat crime, and on the safeguarding of victims?*

Through delivering new knowledge, the recommendations contained within our paper will equip enforcement and safeguarding efforts with a vital route to understanding the ongoing and longstanding impacts of COVID- 19 across a

number of areas, from the dual perspective of detection and enforcement, and prevention and safeguarding. These factors include:

- Changes in County Lines perpetrator behaviour resulting from social distancing;
- Changes in criminal business models, including decreased risk or increased profitability;
- Changes in offending related to potential shifts to online grooming and internet misuse, and changes to the illegal drug markets generally;
- Changes due to restrictions on movement that increase the risk of vulnerable people's properties to cuckooing, as offenders seek to continue operations with discretion;
- Impacts on already vulnerable children due to the shrinking of opportunities for in-person safeguarding and social care. The connections between children who suffer domestic abuse and CCE have been highlighted.

## **Methods**

Our research is positioned as a “descriptive study based on clear social problems” (Silverman, 2015, p.113), and follows a descriptive case-study design, primarily containing two types of data i) key-informant interviews, and ii) routinely recorded individual-level data from partner organisations at local and national levels (covering both crime and intelligence records, NRM data, and safeguarding case files). Qualitative data derived from interviewing key frontline practitioners will fill a vital evidence gap – providing insights into sudden shifts in perpetrator behaviours, and the emergence of new safeguarding challenges that ensue. Over the project's medium-term, individual level data from project partners will become available to corroborate (or contrast) findings from the interviews, enabling the formulation of both a comprehensive statistical picture and a rich descriptive understanding of how issues and changes are manifesting on the ground for law enforcement and those in safeguarding roles, aiding practitioners to reformulate existing practices, or develop new interventions.

## **Timeline**

This fourteen-month project will conclude in the summer of 2021. Despite this, the research team has committed to the dissemination of interim findings to key stakeholders every three months throughout its duration as our understanding of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic evolve. Our interim findings draw upon qualitative semi-structured interviews with eight participants.

## **Interim Findings**

The COVID-19 pandemic has, without doubt, created challenges for child protection services, the police, and other stakeholders. Much government and media attention has been paid to how lockdown restrictions have affected County Lines operations and the capacity of frontline services to protect victims of CCE. Reductions in the numbers of children reported missing and fewer incidents of serious crime may have obscured increases in the vulnerabilities of children and young people. Indeed, stretched services, school and college closures, and barriers to effective interventions caused by the pandemic increase risks to victims of CCE through County Lines. A lack of sectoral clarity about the scale and form of the problem as well as a reliance on anecdotal and speculative reporting may be obscuring regional variations in experience as well as risks to children and young people and opportunities for frontline services.

Our findings show that perhaps the most direct implication of COVID-19 has been on frontline services, due to the complications of providing support and risk assessment during lockdown. Even prior to the onset of lockdown frontline statutory services, such as the Youth Justice service, reported that resources were already stretched, and the impediments of working during lockdown have only served to exasperate concerns in this area. Law enforcement, however, have had to continue to provide a ‘business as usual’ service, and in some cases have benefitted from being able to reallocate resources due to closure of the country’s night-time economy. Vast reductions in the use of rail transport also bolstered frontline enforcement efforts to disrupt lines in the initial months following the introduction of lockdown, as British Transport Police benefited from the ability to stop and question a much larger proportion of rail users on their reasons for travel. In other instances, frontline services also reported to us that online and remote working had given rise to a number of positive outcomes, including greater flexibility to engage in multi-agency settings, resulting in stronger and more cohesive partnership working.

Harder to assess is the impact on the illegal drug market generally, and it is currently unclear whether perceived changes in point-of-sale tactics and transportation methods are as a result of actual reconstitution, or rather, if they are a continuity that has so far gone underrepresented in popular County Lines discourse. It is however likely that increased visibility, and possibility of detecting children and young people moving drugs on public transport may also have encouraged distribution networks to change their tactics to evade detection.

Young people themselves have also been affected. Missing from home and care reports have dropped dramatically during lockdown (Calouri, 2020) and these

could be cited as evidence that exploitation cases have also decreased. However, the true scale is nebulous at best, with rising concerns that issues are simply not being recorded and that cases of criminal exploitation are roughly the same, if not worse, as a result of lockdown. Some reports have suggested that parents have been less comfortable in disclosing when their children go missing from home, over fears of possible COVID-19 related sanctions. Other participants reported that the number of missing vulnerable children had soared due to the limiting of safeguarding opportunities during the pandemic. In either case, changes in recorded incidence may indicate differences in reporting rather than an actual change. Numbers of missing children, and incidence of violent crime may not proportionately reflect the total number of County Lines operations.

While most children and young people remained indoors, the use of social media became one of few modes of entertainment, and frontline professionals reported increasing cases of online harms and abuse, with perpetrators using platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram and Tik Tok as part of their coercive repertoire. The glamourisation of drug-related wealth has been proliferated by increased social media use, aiding perpetrators in their ability to groom and attract varying demographics of young people.

Young people that remained in regular contact with care providers were generally much less comfortable in making disclosures remotely. Doorstep meetings also significantly impacted the safeguarding abilities of frontline services. Where once professionals could identify potential indicators of familial harm during meetings outside of the home, they had become restricted in their ability to offer the usual safe environment that encourages engagement and disclosures from young people.

Despite some clarifications emerging during the initial phases of our research, the extent and exact impact of COVID-19 in many areas remains unclear. It is difficult to assess whether some of the changes reported in the literature are speculative or locality specific, rather than providing evidence of broader national trends. Due to the lack of frontline reporting and the prevalence of grey literature, it is also difficult to ascertain whether reports which appear to corroborate one another are drawing on speculative or anecdotal evidence from the same places. What is clear however, is that the impact of COVID-19 continues to amplify existing issues, creating challenges for practitioners.

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