Title
Young people and ‘county lines’: a contextual and social account.

Abstract

Purpose

This paper presents an analysis of a ‘county lines’ safeguarding partnership in a large city region of England. A critical analysis of current literature and practice responses to ‘county lines’ is followed by the presentation of an analytical framework that draws on three contextual and social theories of (child) harm. This framework is applied to the partnership work to ask: are the interconnected conditions of criminal exploitation of children via ‘county lines’ understood, do interventions target the contexts of harm, and is social and institutional harm acknowledged and addressed?

Design/methodology/approach

The analytical framework is applied to a dataset collected by the author throughout a two year study of the ‘county lines’ partnership. Qualitative data collected by the author and quantitative data published by the partnership are coded and thematically analysed in NVivo against the analytic framework.

Findings

Critical tensions are surfaced in the praxis of multi-agency, child welfare responses to ‘county lines’ affected young people. Generalising these findings to the child welfare sector at large, it is proposed that the contextual dynamics of child harm via ‘county lines’ must be understood in a broader sense, including how multi-agency child welfare practices contribute to the harm experienced by young people.

Originality

There are limited peer-reviewed analyses of child welfare responses to ‘county lines’. This paper contributes to that limited scholarship, extending the analysis by adopting a critical analytic framework to a regional county lines partnership at the juncture of future national, child welfare responses to ‘county lines’.

Keywords
County lines, extra-familial harm, child welfare, social harm, race
Introduction

This paper applies a contextual and social lens to a multi-agency partnership aimed at safeguarding children involved in ‘county lines’ across a large city region of the UK. Following a discussion of the limited (Maxwell et al, 2019) but emerging literature on the criminal exploitation of children via ‘county lines’, an analytic framework drawing on social and contextual theories of (child) harm is applied to a large mixed-methods data-set collected by the author over a two year period.

‘County Lines’ is a policing term used to describe the distribution of illegal drugs from urban to rural and coastal areas, operated via a ‘branded’ mobile phone line. The criminal exploitation of children via ‘county lines’ is a key strategic priority in the Serious Youth Violence Strategy (HM Government, 2018b). In 2019 the Home Secretary announced £20m funding to tackle ‘county lines’ via the County Lines Coordination Centre (Guardian, 2019). Significant resource is currently focused on ‘county lines’, yet many query the extent to which this is a new trend (Spicer, Moyle and Coomber, 2019; Turner, Belcher and Pona, 2019). A 2019 National Crime Agency briefing (NCA, 2019) reported that 11% of ‘county lines’ featured the exploitation of local ‘juveniles’ and 13% of featured the exploitation of out of force young people; 2% featured child sexual exploitation or abuse. The significance of these figures are inflated when translated into policy and media discourses, yet the significant harm inflicted on a minority of young people is now a priority issue for child welfare agencies in the statutory and non-statutory sectors.

Policy, child welfare and media narratives construct a binary picture of ‘evil’ ‘county lines gangs’ and ‘helpless victims’ (Guardian, 2019). However, some note that many ‘evil’ ‘gang members’ are young people who have been victimised through exploitation or poverty and that “the exploited and the exploiters are often one and the same” (McClean et al, 2020: 86, Koch, 2020). Others assert a more nuanced approach is required to understand what drives child harm via ‘county lines’, for example punitive drug policy (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Moyle, 2019). Whilst some have noted that young people exercise agency and rational choice (albeit constrained) in relation to their involvement (Irwin-Rogers, 2019; Moyle, 2019). The picture is more complex than the prevailing narrative might suggest.

Simultaneously, ‘child criminal exploitation’ is now recognised as a form of child abuse (HM Government, 2018), demanding that multi-agency child safeguarding partnerships
formulate a response. There is an absence of a national strategy for safeguarding adolescents harmed outside of their families (anon, 2019), resulting in varied practice across the UK (Maxwell et al, 2019; Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020); with some young people being re-routed to youth justice services in the absence of such a strategy (Lloyd and Firmin, 2020). A 2019 Home Affairs Select Committee on ‘serious youth violence’ (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2019) concluded there is no strategic oversight, and responses to young people impacted by ‘county lines’ fall between youth justice, child protection agencies and the voluntary sector. Practice challenges abound (ALDCS, 2018, Maxwell et al, 2019, CSPRP, 2020). Whilst the sector seeks to safeguard young people from harms associated with ‘county lines’, an increasing number of young people are convicted for drug offences (McCulloch and Furlong, 2019, Mohidin, 2019). Some argue that mechanisms to identify and support victims, such as the National Referral Mechanism, are under-utilised and ineffective (Setter and Baker, 2019; Koch, 2019).

**Social and contextual frameworks for understanding and responding to (child) harm**

At this impasse, contextualised accounts of child harm are gaining popularity. Echoing across ‘youth justice, child protection agencies and the voluntary sector’ is a call for context to be placed at the heart of child safeguarding practice for exploited adolescents (albeit interpreted in different ways). ‘Contextual safeguarding’ is proposed across statutory and non-statutory practice guidance (ALDCS, 2018; Maxwell et al, 2019; CSPRP, 2020), whilst others insist that the socio-economic dynamics of exploitation via the drugs market must be centred (Grimshaw and Ford 2018; Irwin- Rogers; 2019; McClean et al, 2020; Spencer et al; 2019), or that the application of critical criminological theory which problematises state interventions (such as those deployed in the policing of ‘county lines’, Mason, 2019) might expand understandings of harm in this context. Below, an overview of three bodies of literature that engage with the social and contextual dynamics of harm are presented as the basis for an analytic framework via which data from the ‘county lines’ project is analysed.

Beckett, Holmes and Walker (2017) propose that ‘interconnected conditions’ must be understood in order to effectively respond to child exploitation, including: the source of risk, the young person’s vulnerability and (lack of) protective structures. Describing child sexual exploitation (CSE) as: ‘the outcome of a complex interplay between contextually bound individual actions and interactions and individually-mediated structural opportunities and constraints’ (in Beckett, forthcoming).
Beckett’s work helpfully navigates binary notions of responsibility; demonstrating the relationship between young people’s agency and the constrained contexts they navigate.

Young people involved in ‘county lines’ are navigating a range of contexts often outside of the family home (Home Office, 2018; Hudek, 2018), with some exceptions (Moyle, 2019). Significant work is underway developing child protection assessment and intervention methods that can target the contexts where abuse happens (Firmin, 2020). ‘Contextual safeguarding’ is an approach to safeguarding adolescents grounded in Bourdieu’s theory of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). It describes the relationship between young people and the contexts they navigate, as mediated by forms of ‘capital’ (social, economic, cultural, symbolic) and their understanding of, and engagement in, the ‘rules of play’ that define given contexts (Firmin, 2020). A contextual safeguarding approach requires the ‘social conditions’ of harm be included in child protection assessments and interventions, with a view to changing harmful contexts, not just the individuals navigating them. The ‘contextual safeguarding’ framework is currently being implemented in a number of local authorities across England and Wales and requires child protection systems to be able to target the social conditions of abuse, incorporate extra familial contexts in child protection legislative frameworks, utilise partnerships with individuals and organisations responsible for the spaces where young people spend their time, and measure contextual outcomes (for a full account see Firmin, 2020).

Also drawing on Bourdieu, Mason (2019) proposes the application of a ‘social harm theory’ lens (Dorling et al, 1995) to the study of statutory interventions into forms of child and community harm, that can account for complex dynamics of harm, including those caused by statutory interventions. As young people involved in county lines are variably cast as exploited victims and violent criminals, social harm theory provides a useful lens through which to assess the current conjecture. Social harm theory highlights that a host of actions that cause harm to people and their environments are not constructed as ‘crimes’, thus mediating our understanding of them as ‘harms’ (Dorling et al, 1995). Applying this lens to an undercover ‘drugs’ policing operation in a UK town, Mason (2019) provides an account of the multiple harms enacted on an already marginalised community by an intervention ostensibly deployed for public safety:

...the police were accused of institutional racism and complicity in what was seen to be a deceitful operation, where economic vulnerabilities had been exploited to entice young people to commit crimes.

(Mason, 2019:3)
By considering ‘harm’ beyond ‘crime’ our gaze is usefully extended beyond the abusive
dynamics of exploitation to the activities of the state in constructing criminality (i.e. cannabis
possession) and inflicting harm on children and families through multi-agency interventions
(Dorling et al, 1995).
The paper draws on data collected by the author over a two year study into a large-scale, child safeguarding partnership aimed at tackling the criminal exploitation of young people via the ‘county lines’ in England (the ‘county lines project’ from herein). A contextual and social analytic framework is applied to the data to explore how the project understood and responded to the issue, and to offer a deeper theoretical framing to the challenges it faced, before suggesting pathways for future research and practice.

**Method**

*The ‘county lines’ project*

The ‘county lines project’ was a partnership between local councils making up a large city region of England. The project staff centrally coordinated cross-sector partners to profile and safeguard young people, aged up to 25, involved in ‘county lines’. The project was staffed by: data analysts, who used police and local authority data to identify young people at risk of, or involved in ‘county lines’, notifying safeguarding partnerships and the police of its datasets; project workers who liaised with local authority safeguarding partnerships to ensure young people received support either via local authority provision or via three partnered voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations delivering specialist case work to young people. The project aimed to offer a bespoke safeguarding model by coordinating analytic and support functions to build a holistic response to young people.

*Data set*

All data were collected by the author. Qualitative research methods were used (see table one) and quantitative data from project reports were collected and analysed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to establish the emerging practice issues, challenges and successes. Embedded observations included observations of individual practice and team meetings. Young people’s case files held by the VCS organisations and the local authorities were reviewed. The total datasets are outlined in table one.

**Table One: Qualitative methods used and resulting datasets**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Semi-structured interviews (total)</th>
<th>Case file reviews (total)</th>
<th>Embedded observations (total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analysts (four)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project workers (four)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Authority sites</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VCS providers (three)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Demographics

The project collected demographic data for the young people referred to the project and identified through the analytic work (published annually). At the time of writing the project had only published its first year data which is included in the dataset presented. The author reviewed 37 young people’s case in the first year of the study and they are also included in the dataset. These demographics are outlined in table two.

Table two: Demographics of year one case files reviews, referral and analytic cohorts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age¹</th>
<th>Ethnicity²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year one case files</td>
<td>Male:68%</td>
<td>12-17: 73%</td>
<td>Black:41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female:32%</td>
<td>18-22: 27%</td>
<td>White:41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other:24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year one referral cohort</td>
<td>Male:83%</td>
<td>12-18:84%</td>
<td>Black:49.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female:17%</td>
<td>19-24:9%</td>
<td>Other:30.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White:19.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year one wider cohort (identified through analytic work)</td>
<td>Male:89%</td>
<td>11-19:50%</td>
<td>Black:64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female:10%</td>
<td>20+:50%</td>
<td>White:19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other:17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author. Interview transcripts, case file review templates and observation templates were entered into NVivo. The data was thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and coded against an analytic framework developed from the literature review (figure one).
The analytic framework consolidates emerging evidence discussed in the literature review. Combining three theoretical lenses allowed an analysis of the project data asking three questions emerging from the current ‘county lines’ literature:

- Are the interconnected conditions for child exploitation understood? (Beckett et al., 2017)
- Do responses target the contexts where harm happens? (Firmin, 2017)
- Is social and institutional harm acknowledged and addressed? (Dorling, 1995)

**Ethics**

Ethical approval was granted for the study by [anon]. Permission to use the data for further academic publishing was granted by the project manager.

**Limitations**

The data is drawn from one geographical area of England. There are regional trends (as indicated by the existing literature, i.e. CSPRP, 2020), conclusions drawn are corroborated against the literature. This article focuses on challenges surfaced through the study, this does not discount areas of good practice that are not the focus of analysis here.
Findings

Are the interconnected conditions for child exploitation understood?
The project had a dual focus of supporting young people and building an intelligence picture to disrupt ‘county lines networks’. It is reasonable that the project was premised on an understanding of what the sources of harm were to young people, the nature of young people’s vulnerability to this harm and what protective structures might be required to mitigate against vulnerability (Beckett, 2017).

The project shared its referral and analytic data to the regional police to support disruption work, locating individual ‘gang leaders’ or ‘drug dealers’ as the source of harm to young people who were exploited into lower level roles. The ‘mapping’ of associations between young people referred to the project or identified by the analytic work, was used to pinpoint ‘perpetrators’, or those who were thought to be at the ‘top’ of the ‘line’. This co-ordinated model, combining analytic and case work, reflects the co-located multi-agency work that emerged as a response to CSE over the last decade, and is championed as best practice in responding to ‘county lines (CSPRP, 2020).

Analysis of the project data surfaced challenges and inconsistencies in this approach to identifying and responding to ‘sources of harm’. Specifically, how the project determined vulnerable versus risky cohorts, and shared this data with the police for the purpose of disruption. Young people who are criminally exploited are often both victims and ‘perpetrators’ of harm (Coliandris, 2015; Moyle, 2019; McClean et al, 2020) and this raised challenges in relation to the information sharing requirements within the project. Whilst project staff were keen for information to be shared to support intelligence-led disruption work, case workers and frontline local authority staff were concerned about how this information would be used. In an observation of an analytic meeting, one analyst shared that case workers were concerned about older ‘associates’ of young people being criminalised when they were also a vulnerable young person: “frontline workers are very concerned about proactive work being done on young people when they want to do engagement etc.” This emerged as a major barrier for the project:

“one of the main challenges that we’ve had and possibly do still continue to have but I’m not sure to what extent at the moment is that the caseworkers, I don’t think they fully understand what the analysts will do with the information that they give them. I think they have this concern that it will automatically go to the police and those young people will then get into trouble”.
Notwithstanding a lack of transparency, these tensions surfaced critical questions about information sharing in multi-agency settings where young people are often harming and being harmed in multiple nuanced ways and highlighted a truncated assessment of vulnerability that relied solely on age as a determinant:

“...I’ve probably got as many 19-25 year olds on the cohorts as I have the under 18s really...a lot of the ones certainly from a policing point of view that are more sort of the exploiters so to speak, probably are the 19-25 year olds that obviously we can and do share that with the police, and the police seems to mainly do want to work with certainly the ones that are looking at the proactive operations that they want to work with the older ones, you know, rightly or wrongly, because they perceive them to be the ones more likely to be at the top of the chain”.

Young people were positioned as the sources of their own harm with relatively undefined criteria sifting out the exploiters from the exploited. The concerns shared by the VCS case workers and frontline staff in the local authorities were realised through the partnership working arrangements: information about the young people they were working with was shared with the police for the purposes of disruption.

Policy and research relating to the criminal exploitation of young people via ‘county lines’ centre information sharing as a core principle and promote the use of databases to record and monitor at-risk group of young people (CSPRP, 2020). Research by Vaughn (2019:66) into ‘risk work’ in the field of counter-radicalisation practices highlights the ways in which “value-laden judgements about children’s experiences, behaviours or characteristics are therefore interposed by subjective interpretations of vulnerability, which, like risk, is a concept saturated with problematic assumptions and often patriarchal, gendered, heteronormative, cultural and age-specific pre-conceptions”. This analysis can be extended to ‘risk work’ with ‘county lines’ affected young people, where dominant norms about gender, race and age intersect to produce subjective assessments of vulnerability and risk. In 2018 Amnesty (Amnesty, 2018) published a report into the Metropolitan Police’s Gangs Matrix that revealed a significant over-representation of Black young people on its risk matrix: 80% were aged 12-24 and 87% were from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic backgrounds (78% of whom were Black), similar demographics to the young people profiled by the project studied here. Significantly and 35% had no serious offending history and 64% were deemed to be low risk of committing a violent offence. Nonetheless the report concluded that:

“this stigma of suspicion or guilt can follow individuals through their interaction with a wide range of local services, including Jobcentres, housing associations and schools. These services may not have enough context to judge the original intelligence, or the
degree of a young person’s alleged ‘gang association’. Instead, inclusion on the matrix may be read as evidence of ‘gang membership’. In this way the fine line between intelligence about a person’s associations and evidence about their actions is easily erased.

(Amnesty, 2018: 41)
It was not possible to collect project data to test the extent that profiling information sharing arrangements contributed to the safety or criminalisation of young people. However, the profiling and data-basing activities, and the tensions surfaced between project partners, corroborates the robust evidence from the sector regarding the role of data sharing in the over-criminalisation of Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic boys and young men (O’Neill and Loftus, 2013; Williams and Clarke, 2016; Amnesty, 2018, Vaugh, 2019). The sharing of ‘soft intelligence’ via ‘matrices’ and ‘mapping meetings’ as proposed by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2020: section 4.9) require immediate and critical consideration for criminally exploited adolescents where multi-agency partners have conflicting priorities (Andell, 2019, Vaughn, 2019).

In addition to these pertinent ethical questions about the purpose and impact of multi-agency information sharing; the reduction of ‘sources of risk’ to ‘older young people’ and ‘associates’ represents an unambitious attempt at grappling with the complexity of young people’s lives; whereby ‘risky’ older siblings and friends come to embody a range of contextual and social harms and pressures to which they themselves are subject.

A similarly individualised account of young people’s vulnerability limited the potential of the project to flex its considerable cross-regional capacity to address re-occurring structural dynamics of harm. One-to-one case work focused on individual decisions, choices and behaviours, situating vulnerability in the attitudes and actions of young people. In a review of 37 case files from year one of the study, the most frequent type of support offered to young people were: help with accessing education, employment and training (EET, n=12); psycho-education and awareness raising work around ‘gangs’ and relationships (n=11), safety planning (n=7), family work (n=7) and the use of secure accommodation and relocations (n=7). Other work included confidence building and positive life goal work with young people who had ongoing convictions, increasing young people’s ‘self-awareness’ about the risks of exploitation and consequential thinking work around the impact of their choices on their family and education options.

Psycho-educative and awareness raising work can play a key role supporting young people who have been abused, empowering young people with knowledge that they may not have had access to; increasing a young person’s ‘social’ or ‘cultural’ capital, to borrow from Bourdieu. However, psycho-educative work alone risks locating vulnerability firmly at an individual level, without addressing external dynamics that contribute to the conditions in which harm happens. Professional associations (ADCS, 2019), charities (Turner, Belcher and
Pona, 2019) and government committees (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2019) are at pains to stress the role of poverty and social policy, such as school exclusion policy, (Temple, 2020; CSPRP, 2020) in driving the conditions for harm. Yet responses remain largely individualised. Case workers actively engaged in support around education, employment and training, and advocated for young people who were at risk of school exclusion. However as one case workers queried: what was the unique offer the project was making beyond individual case work? Could such a project, operating as it did, at a regional level with buy-in from key stakeholders, have located local, regional and national policies as sources of harm to young people (i.e. lack of funding for schools), creating vulnerabilities (i.e. school exclusion) that require strategic attention in order to scaffold protective structures (resourced school inclusion policies), thus enhancing their safeguarding offer? The role of local authority social care teams in addressing, not just individual harm, but social policy and provision that drives multiple instances of harm could begin to address these challenges (Spolander et al, 2016). With school exclusion positioned as a major driver of child criminal exploitation it is unclear why significant action at a regional and national level to end exclusions has not yet been initiated (Temple, 2020).

Do responses target the contexts where harm happens?

‘Peer mapping’ was the major way in which the project sought to adopt a ‘contextual safeguarding’ approach, immediately necessitating consideration of the tensions highlighted above: notably how multi-agency processes contribute to or mitigate processes of criminalisation and the extent to which ‘risk’ is reductively embodied in older young people and ‘associates’. The project had a specific goal to create ‘maps’ of young people and their ‘associates’ as a means of identifying those ‘at risk’ of ‘county lines’ (as recommended in CSPRP, 2020). However, beyond ‘mapping’ ‘associates’, tensions emerged in how the project sought to work with friendships as a significant component of the lives of young people. Firmin (2020) proposes that peer relationships are viewed through a strengths-based lens, exploring them (with young people) as opportunities for safety. Indeed, friendships can be central to creating safety in the lives of young people, however young people in the project were deemed to pose a risk to their friends and vice versa through ‘association’ and by virtue of being in the same place, school or friendship circle. Again this foreshortened analysis of context resulted in peers being located as sources of harm, rather than the contexts in which those peer relationships functioned.
Significant resource was invested in mapping friendships and associations yet when friends were referred (or referred each other) to the project for support they were engaged in one-to-one case work with case workers sharing that it was ‘inappropriate’ or a ‘crossing of interests’ to work with the friends together. Historically, youth work has engaged in group work with young people, including friendship groups, facilitating youth engagement with issues around community violence and institutional racism (Harden et al, 2015), however this has largely been replaced (particularly within statutory organisations) with one-to-one casework (Lavie-Ajayi and Krumer-Nevo, 2013). A disconnect emerged between exploring friendship as a significant feature of young peoples’ lives, with young people and their peers, and mapping friendships for the purpose of ‘analysis’ and generating intelligence. This was raised by a project analyst who queried what the project would do with identified ‘associates’ when there is no context to their relationship? With this query unresolved, associate mapping contributed to an ongoing and expansive cohort list of several hundred (figure anonymised) individuals that was shared across multi-agency and police partnerships.

Initial enquiries into the use of peer mapping in multi-agency child safeguarding partnerships has surfaced these critical issues; warning that peer mapping is ‘is likely to involve an interference with the Article 8(1) right of the Human Rights Act – the right to private and family life – of all/some of the young people within the peer group’ (Lloyd et al, 2019:3). These issues played out in the project and were of particular import because of the ways in young people’s data was shared across the project (as discussed earlier). One function of peer-mapping in this way is that it allows for the inclusion and monitoring of a broad population of young people and their associates on the basis of ‘suspicion’. The ethical and rights implications of this become particularly relevant for this cohort of young people, when in addition to the article 8 interferences outlined above, association mapping has been applied to friendships between Black young males as evidence of gang affiliation (Williams and Clarke, 2016) situated within a long history of ‘suspicion’ (through association) being operationalised in the policing of Black communities (IRR, 2020).

“even if there isn’t for instance an intelligence report with that person linked to county lines, if a strong associate of that person, someone who they perhaps go missing with all the time, that therefore we would potentially include on our charts by virtue of the fact that they mightn’t have specific county lines intelligence to them but from their associations and close network links that they would be worthy of inclusion on our association charts and in turn, to be provided to local authorities and potentially police”.

(Project staff interview)
The ‘dangerousness’ of this process of association for young people is clear: 37% of individuals in prison for Joint Enterprise offences are young Black men (Williams and Clarke, 2016) implicated in offences they have not committed through loose connections to a person, or location in which an incident happened.

As discussed earlier, project partners, usually those working directly with young people, were concerned about this process of association and information sharing and the criminalising impact this could have on young people. One case worker suggested that resource could be better spent on developing a bespoke model of support that could work with and support friendships, families, and issues around debt (as an example) that impacted young people across the project. Viewing friendships and associations through the lens of safety and not risk, and locating these friendships and relationships in context, could support protective relationship work with young people (see also Firmin, 2020).

Beyond delivering one-to-one case work and mapping peer relationships, the project sought to identify and intervene in locations of child harm. Reviews of case files from the VCS organisations and local authorities suggested the partnerships identified risk in locations, but interventions focused on individual or groups of young people and included: dispersal, the use of exclusion zones to prevent young people returning to an area, blocks on social media to disrupt contact with ‘risky’ friends, panic buttons and CCTV installed at home and curfews or bans from associating with certain friends. Whilst these interventions might increase the physical safety of young people, they leave the contexts of harm unaddressed and pose significant risks to civil liberties (Anon, 2020). Extending these place-based methods, relocations, or plans to relocate, were common in the dataset. Relocations were mentioned in 19% of the 37 case files reviewed (n=7). When asked about the interventions that might increase a young person’s safety, some project staff struggled to articulate a response:

*I don't know the type of interventions. I guess would just be potentially rehousing them and their family to a safer area.*

(Project Staff, Interview)

A recent study (Anon, 2020) into the use of relocation in England and Wales revealed that in some local authorities up to 24% of young people referred to children’s services due to extra-familial forms of harm are accommodated in out of area placements. They concluded that public space risk to the young people resulted in a private-space intervention, leaving the conditions of harm unaddressed and disrupting important relationships. Whilst the study did not analyse racial
proportionality in the reported cohorts, it is pertinent to note that Black Caribbean 16–17 year olds are three times as likely to be living in out-of-home care than White children (Bywaters et al, 2017), again demanding closer analysis of how distant placements are used for ‘county lines’ affected young people.

The data raises questions about the role of children’s social care, and the multi-agency partnerships in which they sit, in replicating practices of surveillance, removal and disruption that are typical of the more traditional policing responses they are ostensibly seeking to avoid.

**Is social and institutional harm acknowledged and addressed?**

Black boys and young men represented 49.7% of all young people aged up to 25 referred to the project for support, and 64% of the larger cohort identified through police data and ‘associate’ mapping. The region in which the project was situated is demographically younger and more ethnically diverse than other regions in the UK, but the population of Black people in the region of all ages is 13.3% (UK Government, 2020). A national review conducted by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (CSPRP, 2020) on ‘child criminal exploitation’ (CCE) evidenced a disproportional representation of young Black boys in affected cohorts of young people across the UK.

There has been little examination of the role of race in the (identification of) vulnerability to exploitation via ‘county lines’. The national review by the CSPRP (2020:8) noted that the over-representation of Black boys in the cohorts they had reviewed was a ‘serious concern’ yet made no recommendations to the sector as to how this might be understood or addressed. A 2018 Violence and Vulnerability Unit (2018) report on ‘county lines’ similarly skipped over this issue:

*As with the NCA report the gang constituency may appear to over represent members from BME communities in terms of race and ethnicity, however, this representation seems to be a direct reflection of the populations of the host boroughs or cities from where they originate, rather than any intrinsic statement about these communities. We concur with this position.*

(Ford, 2018:3)

The report seeks to avoid making an ‘intrinsic statement’ about ‘BME communities’ echoing a chorus of voices in the sector that remind us that any child, from any background, can come to harm or be abused (Maxwell et al, 2019). This is important, as limited typographies of abuse and victimhood have created service blindness to children who do not ‘fit’ our expectations of victimhood due to their gender, race, (dis)ability or class (Brown, 2019). Indeed there is
evidence that Black young people are over-identified as perpetrators of harm and underrepresented as victims (Berlowitz, 2013), and others have spoken to the ‘adultification’ (Davis and Marsh, 2020) of Black young people that accelerates this disproportional treatment. Following the direction of this work, this analysis asks not ‘what is it about Black young boys that means they are overrepresented in multi-agency ‘county lines’ cohorts?’ but rather ‘what is it about multi-agency ‘county lines’ processes that result in a disproportionate representation of young Black people’? Williams and Clarke (2016) have warned of a ‘strategic silence’ on the issue of race, ‘gangs’ and the treatment of Black boys and men by the criminal justice system and partnered agencies, where data is not recorded or analysed, and racial disproportionality is minimised and left un-interrogated. There is an urgency to consider how routine policies and practices in multi-agency partnerships and the national context they operate within, might be driving this over-representation, with a specific consideration as to whether the inclusion of young people in such cohorts contributes to their protection or further harm.

Social harm theory provides a useful framing for understanding the multitude of harms inflicted on young people who are implicated in ‘county lines’, beyond those that are constructed as ‘crimes’; i.e. trafficking and modern slavery. Some have begun to situate the burgeoning set of ‘county lines’ discourses and practices in a long history of racialised policing strategies in the UK, pointing to the ways in which British policing and the criminal justice system have long been operationalised as a means of suppressing former colonial, and later racialised British communities (Koch, 2019). Two major vehicles through which this has been achieved are through the policing of drugs (Koram, 2019) and the policing of ‘gangs’ (Williams, 2015). We see these two policing strategies converge under the ‘county lines’ issue.

The ‘county lines project’ used police and local authority data to generate an expansive cohort list of young people ‘at risk’ of ‘county lines’ which was shared with a range of multi-agency partners, including local authorities and the police. The over-representation of Black boys in a project where hundreds of young people (figure anonymised) were profiled on the basis of police ‘intelligence’ needs to be situated within a criminal justice system that is plagued by racial disproportionality at every stage. Stop and search rates in the UK are currently more disproportional than ever, further exaggerated for drug related searches where Black people are nine times as likely to be stopped and searched for drugs despite being less likely than White people to have a positive ‘find’ rate (Stop-Watch, 2019). These figures point to the ways in which policing data (such as stop and search records and arrest data based on suspicion) do not accurately reflect crime, or
Indeed vulnerability, rather they reflect policing practices, and raise questions about the efficacy (and ethics) of using policing data to identify ‘at risk’ cohorts of young people.

Secondly, consideration must be given to the implications of profiling young people. The project and its partnerships, reflecting a wider policy agenda (‘county lines’ emerged as a policing priority from the Government’s Ending Gangs and Youth Violence programme, see anon, 2019), re-purposed gang narratives and gang strategies in its management of young people deemed to be involved in ‘county lines’. ‘Gangs’ were discussed 348 times in the data set, the three VCS organisations involved in the delivery of the project were specialist ‘gangs’ services, and referrals to multi-agency ‘gangs units’ were a frequent outcome of multi-agency risk panels. Referrals to the project noted young people’s ‘gang affiliation’ and mapping work carried out by project analysts sought to establish connections between young people and local ‘gang members’. The collating of a cohort of ‘at risk’ youth and the sharing of this information on to a ‘county lines matrix’, mirror practices deployed by the police in monitoring gang ‘nominals’ (Amnesty, 2018).

The project profiled young people for the purpose of notifying them to local authority children’s social care teams and the police. Here young people within the project were positioned as victims of exploitation by gangs and they also found themselves positioned as gang members:

“The environments that they're kept in, often with other vulnerable people, drug users. I guess just generally the gang culture. It's not always a gang, but a lot of the time it is. Then if you're involved in county lines then it would normally mean that you're also involved in a gang culture and everything that also comes with that, not just in the county area but also in your local area. And the impact that can have on your family as well as your friends”.

(Project Staff, Interview)

Whilst the harm that criminal ‘gangs’ are inflicting on young people has received considerable attention by policy makers and in the media, there has been little interrogation into the racialised idea of, and policing of the ‘gang’, as an institutional harm to young people in this context. There is a significant and recurring over-representation of young Black people in ‘gangs’ cohorts, as discussed earlier and reflected beyond the Met’s Matrix (Williams, and Clarke, 2016). Whilst the Government has significantly increased its spending on the policing of ‘gangs’ and drugs since 2011 (marking the start of the Endings Gangs and Youth Violence programme, Gunter, 2017) there is no evidence of a significant relationships between those
deemed to be ‘gang’ affiliated and serious youth violence and crime (Williams and Clarke, 2016). This signals an institutionalised racial lens being applied to the use of the gang label (and the subsequent monitoring and intervention this entails); whereby the normalisation of the race and crime relationship is so deeply embedded in institutional practices (Williams and Clarke, 2016) that it continues to hold legitimacy despite significant evidence to the contrary.

In addition to the harm caused by the disproportionate and often inaccurate labelling of young people as ‘gang’ affiliated, this labelling can have significant implications for young people’s welfare when it is shared through a range of multi-agency processes. Data analysts in the project shared that if young people who had encountered the project were later stopped or arrested by the police it would flag up on police records that they were ‘county lines’ affiliated. Amnesty, in an investigation into the Matrix (information from which is also routinely shared through multi-agency partnerships) exposed that those (mostly young Black men) named on the Matrix (based on spurious associations often with no criminal histories) later faced barriers in access to education, housing, benefits and employment (Amnesty, 2018). Cyclically, anti-gang and drug policing activities in the UK account for a large number of young Black people being stopped and searched, arrested and imprisoned (Release, 2020). Racialised notions of criminality that are mobilised through the idea of ‘gangs’ result in disciplinary actions in schools toward Black pupils, accelerating their contact with criminal justice agencies, described as the ‘school to prison pipeline (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). School exclusions and poverty are identified as significant vulnerabilities to exploitation (Grimshaw and Ford, 2018; Spencer et al, 2019; Temple, 2020), and in the project studied here 42.8% of the year one referral cohort were not in education with a further 24.4% attending a Pupil Referral Unit. In a national context in which Black Caribbean young people are three times more likely to be excluded from school than white pupils (UK Government, 2020), determining whether multi-agency processes accelerate or mitigate against exclusion and marginalisation are crucial.

Whilst the gang narrative is ostensibly adopted in the context of ‘county lines’ to foreground the vulnerability of young people, Insa Koch’s review of prosecutions of ‘county lines’ cases under Modern Slavery legislation suggests the contrary:

*Inconsistencies and lack of awareness still abound. All too often, young people are not entered into the NRM mechanism. And even when they are, the decision of whether or “not to treat a person as a victim of modern slavery is discretionary. County lines gangs are organised around chains of command and professional judgement of when a person goes from being an exploited victim to becoming what the police call an ‘alpha victim’ – someone who exploits others – is not always clear. As a result, young people continue to*
be prosecuted, while cash-strapped local authorities and police lack the means to offer the support with welfare and youth work that victims desperately need”

(Koch, 2019: no page number)

As already discussed there was significant confusion within the project about who was a victim or a perpetrator of harm. The project aimed to ensure a safeguarding response for all young people (aged up to 25), yet arbitrary conclusions were made about age and vulnerability and young people’s details were passed on to the police for ‘proactive operations’. The implications of which are stark; in once case two young people were identified during an arrest: the younger person was referred to the project for support and the older young person was issued with a Slavery and Trafficking Order (STO).

The policing of the illicit drug trade has resulted in significant disruption, displacement and detention of racialised communities in the UK and around the world (Koram, 2019). Whilst issues related to poverty and drug policy are left unchallenged, there is a risk that young people are criminalised through the discourses and systems that claim to center their victimisation:

“By prosecuting these young men under slavery legislation, we are witnessing a macabre historical shift: the slave holders of today are not the white British masterclass but typically young, black men who come from the same disenfranchised communities as those they are said to exploit”.

(Koch, 2019: no page number)

There is a danger that the gang narrative, re-purposed in relation ‘county lines’, funnels young people into a system that is not equipped (nor is it designed) to support their welfare and protect them against criminalisation. The profiling of young people ‘at risk’ of ‘county lines gangs’ through databases, cohort lists and multi-agency risk panels contribute to processes of criminalisation (often for low-level incidents such as cannabis possession or distribution, Amnesty 2018) that, as the data and literature indicates, are deeply racialised and draw wide populations of ‘suspected’ young people into multi-agency processes (Mason, 2019). Whilst the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2020) report into child criminal exploitation promotes the use of data collection and profiling by local areas, the analysis presented here indicates the ethical and rights impacts of such profiling work.
This raises critical questions about how these strategies might be replaced with strategies of inclusion, welfare and care, not just for young people but for everyone who is harmed as a result of a highly criminalised, and thus often precarious and dangerous drugs market, (Moyle, 2019). This paper does not claim to have the authority or data to unpack these issues but there is a clear need to pierce the ‘strategic silence’ on race and county lines ‘gangs’, and to centre multi-agency practices such as school exclusion (UK Government, 2020) and police surveillance (Amnesty, 2018, Williams, 2019) in our understanding of how young people become identified in multi-agency ‘county lines’ cohorts.

Conclusion

An analytical framework developed from three major theoretical contributions to understanding harm have been applied to ‘county lines’ safeguarding partnership in England at a critical juncture in which child welfare agencies are re-articulating criminal exploitation as a form of child abuse (APPG, 2017). In doing so significant implications for future safeguarding praxis in relation to children and ‘county lines’ are surfaced.

The analytical lenses applied to the project data each drew on Bourdieu’s social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986), considering how a young person’s access to capital helps them to navigate harmful social fields that are structured by significant power imbalances – between abusers and young people, or young people and the state. Scholars in the community safety field have utilised these ideas to understand the experiences of gang involved youth (Harding, 2012; Andell, 2019). Here ‘bridging social capital’ (Andell, 2019) is suggested as a redistributive intervention at the micro and macro level that can bridge young people into safe and legitimate economic spheres. Yet it is hard to imagine how such work can be successful in the face of such powerfully divisive practices as those associated with dominant ‘county lines gangs’ discourses and strategies.

Bourdieu’s concept of ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) allows us to shift the lens through which ‘county lines gangs’ are analysed; moving away from the question ‘why are young people involved in gangs and how can they be disrupted’ to ‘how is the idea of the gang maintained by a variety of state actors along inherently classed and racialised lines’ and ‘what is the implication of this for young people’? Symbolic violence may be exerted when ‘county lines’ is inserted into youth justice interventions, or child protection meetings concerning Black young people, or in the ways that Black neighbourhoods are profiled as ‘gang affected’ despite lower levels of serious youth violence, and are policed according to this logic (Williams and Clarke, 2016).

Manchester-based youth project Reclaim (2020) report that whilst young people
recognised ‘gangs’ and ‘county lines’ as forms of violence impacting their communities, they felt this was underpinned by sensationalist media reporting, fatalism about their communities and racism, leading to a reluctance to go to adults for support and increased experiences of stop and search on the streets. Additionally young people said that being labelled as ‘gang’ affiliated or as affected by CSE undermined supportive, hopeful and respectful interventions and did not build on their strengths.

Contextualised responses to child harm point to a range of alternative practices of inclusion and care. Bernard (2020) notes the specific benefit of this for working class and Black families; noting that ‘contextual safeguarding’ offers a lens through which intersecting inequalities can be understood to impact on the lives of young people (see Bernard 2020). Young people at Reclaim describe ‘empathy mapping’ as an activity between young people and support agencies that builds on strengths-based and inclusive mapping work to understand and promote relationships of trust and understanding (Reclaim, 2020). ‘Social capital bridging’ might usefully be deployed through a ‘social model’ of child protection (Featherstone, Gupta, Morris and White, 2018) both of which promote redistributive social policies that financially resource communities, in turn resourcing them to formulate their own responses to trauma and violence (Generation Five, 2017). Such a framing must then be extended to consider the symbolic violence enacted on young people through dominant and racialised risk-crime-safeguarding narratives that are operationalised by the State through multi-agency partnerships and practices, (risk labelling, stop and search, profiling, etc.) that reproduce limiting, deficit-based and criminalising responses to young people. Adopting this lens, synergies between safeguarding responses to the harms discussed here (‘county lines’, ‘gangs’, ‘radicalisation’) require further evaluation.

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Further reading

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