

County lines: what you need to know

Children of all ages and backgrounds are at risk of being exploited by criminal gangs who'll use them to transport drugs and money around the country. This is 'county lines' in a nutshell. Despite the coronavirus pandemic, gangs have continued to exploit children, so it's important you know what it is and what signs to look out for.

What is county lines?

- A child is 'groomed' by a criminal gang, then exploited to transport drugs and money from one area (county) to another – usually from an urban location to a rural or coastal one. Grooming can happen in person, or online on social media apps like Snapchat
- The child may be trafficked to the gang's 'trap houses' or 'bandos' miles away from home, to find 'customers', deal with rival gangs and sell drugs
- To the gang, the child is an expendable commodity. They're likely to face violence and sexual exploitation
- The 'line' refers to the phone line that the gang uses for selling drugs

Should I be worried?

Hopefully not. However, **any child is vulnerable to exploitation.**

Criminal gangs are known to target:

- **Children with vulnerabilities**, such as poverty, family breakdown, exclusion from school – because they're susceptible to manipulation and coercion
- **Children from stable or affluent families** – because they're less likely to be known to the police and may blend in better in the town the gang sends them to
- **Girls and young children** as well as boys and teenagers – children as young as 7 are being groomed by gangs, and girls are often groomed into relationships with gang members or used to transport drugs as they're less likely to be stopped by the police

What are the signs I should be looking out for?

If your child is affected by county lines exploitation, there may be some signs. Here are some **key indicators** that you should look out for.

Is your child:

Returning home late, staying out all night or going missing?	Receiving unexplained money, phone(s), clothes or jewellery?
Being found in areas away from home?	Increasingly disruptive or aggressive?
Increasing their drug use, or being found to have large amounts of drugs on them?	Using sexual, drug-related or violent language you wouldn't expect them to know?
Being secretive about who they are talking to and where they are going?	Coming home with injuries or looking particularly dishevelled?
Having unexplained absences from school or college?	Having hotel cards or keys to unknown places?

Answering yes to any of these questions does not mean your child is being exploited through county lines. However, you should talk to them about any one of these signs.

What should I do if I suspect my child is being exploited?

Try to stay calm and seek help straight away - there are organisations that can help you. You could do any of the following depending on your circumstances, **but you must tell someone:**

- Report your concerns to children's social care <https://www.gov.uk/report-child-abuse-to-local-council>. A social worker will be able to listen to your concerns and help you to protect your child
- Contact our school. Ask to speak to the **designated safeguarding lead** and explain your concerns to them. They will be able to advise you where to go next
- Contact your local police station or call 101. If your child is missing, remember you don't have to wait 24 hours before making a report
- Contact organisations such as:
 - Crimestoppers 0800 555 111
 - The NSPCC 0808 800 5000
 - Family Lives 0808 800 2222

If you believe your child is in immediate danger, or a threat is made against you or another family member, **call 999 immediately**

Sources

This factsheet was produced by [Safeguarding Training Centre from The Key: www.thekeysupport.com/safeguarding](https://www.thekeysupport.com/safeguarding)

- [What is county lines? The Children's Society](#)
- [Keeping children safe in education, GOV.UK – Department for Education](#)
- [County lines, Fearless](#)
- [Rescue and response pan-London county lines service, Greater London Authority](#)
- [County lines drug supply, vulnerability and harm 2018, National Crime Agency](#)