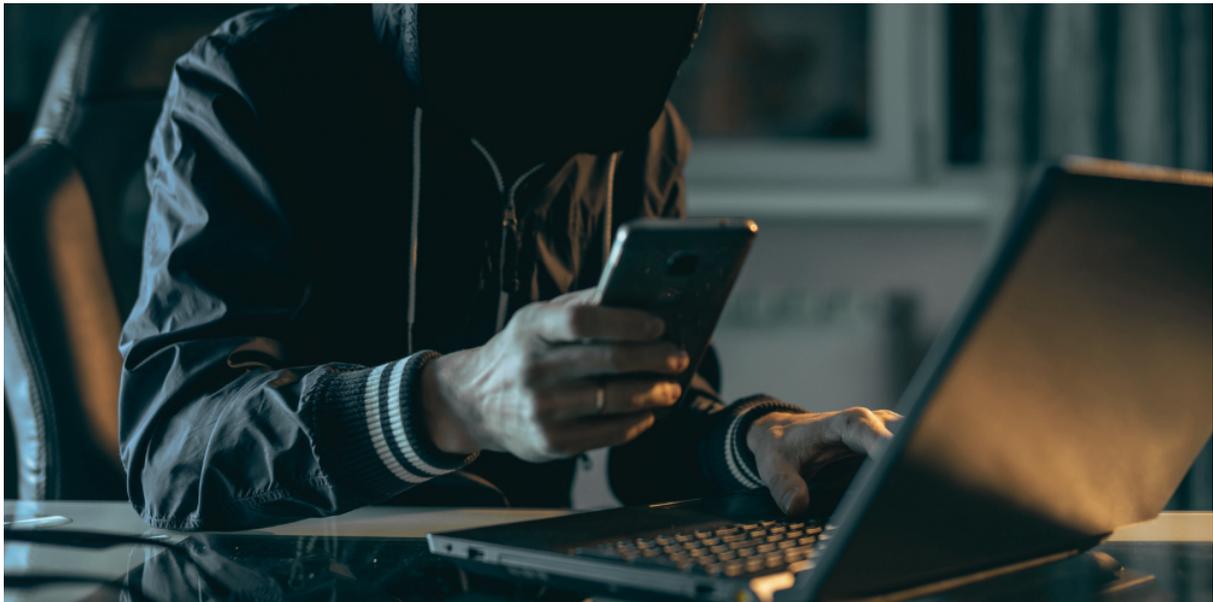


Running out of credit: Mobile phone tech and the birth of county lines

What can law enforcement agencies learn from the early use of tech by the operators of county drug lines?

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'County lines' are drug lines operated by urban gangs or organised crime groups (OCGs) in remote areas¹. Although a mobile phone line is an essential feature of a county drug line, the role of technology as a causal factor for the growth of county lines is often neglected in research and commentary. In this piece, we explore the relationship between mobile phone technology and county lines, using interviews with police officers, tech experts and young people with lived experience of county lines.

Police tactics

Those who see county lines as a new model of drug dealing tend to date its origin between 2015 and 2017, which coincides with the publication of the first NCA threat assessment² on

¹ This is a term coined by the police. Line operators and young people refer to 'going cunch' or 'OT' (out there), alongside regional variations (e.g. 'Grafting' in Merseyside).

²<https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/359-nca-intelligence-assessment-county-lines-gangs-and-safeguarding-2015/file>

this topic. It is very likely however, that county lines were operating long before law enforcement and the Home Office made it a priority. A number of our interview participants believed that county lines had been operating for decades, if not longer. One commented, *"I think county lines have always been there."* One young person involved in county lines told us that in "2017, or even before then...it wasn't as hot...They [police] hadn't caught on to it. They didn't have the operations running to do the raids and stuff."

The use of children within drug supply is not a new phenomenon. Children have historically been used by gangs in a variety of roles; spotters, couriers, security guards or dealers. Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) and Gangs have long sought to exploit lucrative drug markets outside their urban home bases, sending lower level players to deal drugs or to manage networks of 'user-dealers', distributing their products. The major change heralded by county lines was the exploitation of children in an expanded range of roles within those remote drug markets, rather than merely using them as couriers.

Why did this happen? Police enforcement activity in urban areas has made it harder to deal drugs in the open. In the 1980s and 90s, the heroin epidemic and the proliferation of crack cocaine, with associated gun violence, brought about a significant police response. For example, Operation Crackdown involved 30 police forces tackling drug dealing and the Metropolitan Police started using community intelligence to mount a series of high profile and highly visible raids of crack houses. In later years, undercover officers used test purchase tactics, buying drugs and following dealers back to their suppliers. 'Open drug markets' were - and remain - perilous environments for drug dealing. As well as the possibility of arrest, there is a constant risk of being robbed or beaten by users or rival dealers.

Rise of the 'burner'

The mass market for mobile phones transformed the ability of gangs to extend their operations and use new tactics in response to those of the police. Owning a mobile phone changed from being the preserve of 'yuppies' in the early to mid-1990s to becoming an essential device for most adults. This was a 'tipping point' in mobile phone ownership in the UK. In 1999, 46% of the UK population owned a mobile phone. This rose to 73% in 2000 - an astonishing increase³.

Consumer credit was widely available for contract phones and supermarkets entered the 'pay as you go' (PAYG) mobile phone business. When Tesco cut the starting price of a PAYG mobile to £49.99, ASDA cut theirs to £39.99. Tesco sold nearly a quarter-of-a-million phones and quickly became the third largest mobile phone outlet in the country⁴. In an increasingly cut throat price war, even Boots, the chemist, started selling £69.99 handsets in a *'two for the price of one'* deal.

³ International Telecommunications Union, Mobile cellular subscriptions 1999 and 2000. Available: [ITU ICT-Eye: ICT Data Portal](#)

⁴ <https://www.mobilephonehistory.co.uk/networks/payg.php>

The explosion in mobile phone ownership is perhaps best illustrated by the iconic Nokia 3310. Smaller than its predecessor, the 3210, it was customisable, fashionable and extremely durable. With removable SIM cards, the ability to copy contacts between SIM and phone and the ability to send far longer SMS (text) messages, the uses of the new breed of mobile phones in drug dealing were immediately apparent.

Using a PAYG mobile phone line, dealers were now able to deliver drugs directly to users, reducing their vulnerability to police and rival dealers. The people operating the phone lines were able to build a relationship with drug users and - as a result of their increased reliability - grow their client base via introductions from one user to another.

"It's far better if you can build an established relationship with your customers and do it in a closed market where the law enforcement [have a] much more difficult job to try and detect your activities. Since mobile phones became available, and most people started carrying them, that's when we saw the shift [to closed markets]."

Mobile phones also helped established dealing networks in metropolitan areas to extend their operations into rural markets. Mobile phones meant that senior gang members could remain in the metropolitan area and communicate easily with members of their network in rural areas and, from a distance, coordinate supply.

One interviewee said:

"The explosion [of county lines] and the explosion of technology happened pretty much at the same time. [Without mobile phones] we would have seen something, but we wouldn't have seen the scale that we were interested in."

Although we found evidence that smartphones are sometimes involved in the operation of county lines, especially in grooming young people, our interviewees told us that county lines gangs still typically use burner phones to direct those running drugs and communicate with customers.

"The burner phones are a bit of a cliché but they're still valid...In terms of technology, it [county lines] isn't that sophisticated. And that hasn't really changed over the last few years. [Police officer]"

Gang members we spoke to said while drug runners usually carried their personal smartphones in addition to the deal-line burner phones, they were under strict instructions to keep the handsets separate.

One young person explained that when he was running drugs: *"I had two phones. A normal one and a small brick phone. The brick phone is the phone they [the county line] gave me. The iPhone is my phone."*

Another young person said: *“Everyone has two phones. One phone will be used for [county lines] business. One phone is just for snapchat, [to] play around.”*

It was clear that those involved in county lines were wary of using smartphones for any dealing-related activities. One person said: *“I would only have an iPhone if it's off...I'll only use my phone for, like, things that are not compromising. So you wouldn't call that phone [the deal line] for anything.”*

This cautious approach stems from the belief that locations can be tracked more easily on smartphones than on burners. There was also a concern that if seized by police smartphones give police access to more revealing data than a burner phone.

Sales hotline

Burner phones are used to communicate with customers. When a line is ‘active’ a ‘burst’ bulk text message will usually be sent to all local customers. We were told by young people involved in county lines that burners remain central to operations partly because heroin and crack users are often unable to afford smartphones:

“We're quite fortunate that almost all of the customers are heavily addicted to crack and heroin, which means they haven't got any money. Any money they have goes on drugs, so they always use burner phones. I think we'll be in a much more difficult position if they ever can afford smartphones, or burner phones, for example, give them access to things like WhatsApp.” (Expert Witness)

However, some drug users buying from county lines gangs can afford smartphones. One young person involved in county lines said those who bought only crack cocaine were more likely to be ‘rich’ than those who bought crack and heroin. And even for daily heroin users, smartphones have become an important part of life. State agencies they interact with, for claiming benefits or communicating with social landlords such as housing associations, increasingly require them to complete transactions online. Many dependent drug users are also used to communicating with family and friends on social media apps.

The line between smartphones and burner phones is gradually becoming blurred. Affordable PAYG handsets are available from High Street and web-based retailers. The EE Alcatel 1 2021 mobile phone not only looks like an i-phone but also provides access to social media apps, wifi calling and end-to-end encrypted messaging for £34.99 (plus £10 starting credit).

For customers buying drugs from county lines gangs the benefits of owning and using smartphones are likely to increase. The security provided by encrypted messaging apps and disappearing messages is likely to be enhanced as the 5G network expands and public wifi becomes more widely available. One police officer warned:

“Users aren't necessarily going to be those chaotic users especially when you look at more of a recreational drug. So the market for selling drugs to those individuals, those customers is going to be slightly different. And that's probably why we will be looking more at smartphones...They're all going to have end-to-end encryption devices. So you could have something set up on say WhatsApp, and I say WhatsApp because we see it quite a lot, messaging between groups to say, 'right, okay, who wants what?' We won't get to know about that, as in law enforcement...God forbid, if we went to every user having a smartphone, we'd never know what was going on, especially with the 5G network that's coming out.”

The operators of county lines are reluctant to trust smartphones. However, the evidence suggests that as mobile technology develops, opportunities to use web-based tools to communicate with users will increase. We cannot assume this will be a gradual process. Just as ownership of mobile phones in the UK increased from 46% to 73% in one year, it's possible that the abandonment of burners could also happen very quickly - enabled by a step change in 5G availability or new hardware performing the same role as the Nokia 3310 20 years ago.

If that happens, the police forces charged by the Prime Minister and Home Secretary with 'rolling up' county lines may face a cliff edge, beyond which many of the investigative approaches they currently rely on will become redundant almost overnight.

Use of social media in county lines

One significant technological advancement we have observed in our research is the use of social media to groom young people for roles within the drug supply chain. Interviewees described how selected social media channels serve a 'broadcast' function, glamorising a lifestyle ostensibly funded by drug dealing and advertising opportunities to make money. A handful of young people said they got involved with county lines because they saw people they knew posting 'flashy things' on social media.

“It could be a guy that's active [in county lines] might have a nice car, might go out every weekend or whatever, might throw a little snap of his money up or whatever. [Then he might post] like 'oh, holla at man' or a little snap like 'ra, if you want cash holla' [...] something just to entice the younger ones.”

“The child doesn't know that [they] have actually booked themselves in [to] stay the night at the Travelodge up the road. It's that social media element there: that's key, hooking them in.”

The glamorous talk and images are contrived - for the purposes of recruitment. A police officer provided examples of groomers who had hired a Rolex watch and had taken pictures of themselves drinking champagne in a nice hotel to entice young people. Gangs may hire or

borrow high-performance cars for use in videos shared on social media. In many ways the tactics mimic the marketing strategies of Ponzi schemes - multi-layered marketing which pulls people in on a false promise and incentivises them to exploit others

Once young people have engaged with these social media accounts, on Instagram, Snapchat or Telegram, the conversation will be moved onto an end-to-end encrypted messaging environment, also using social media.

Snapchat is seen as the best place to advertise opportunities to make money in county lines. Instagram is also frequently used. In some cases, adverts were more veiled, using only emojis, or code words.

“ I could probably go on my social media now and someone will say ‘who wants to make money’, like they’ll just post it on their Snap, and if you text them you’ll find out what they’re talking about. It’s been going on for ages but differently. So when Snapchat wasn’t around, it would just be word of mouth.” (Young person)

There were also examples of young people advertising themselves as available to work via social media. One interviewee suggested that this had led to young people running drugs for multiple lines rather than having loyalty to one.

“So you've got kids on Snapchat and Tik Tok actually advertising themselves as being available to work. Almost all of the young people I've worked with in the last 18 months have in some way, shape or form, advertised themselves as being available to work.”

Although responding to adverts and advertising themselves as available for work suggests some young people exhibit a degree of agency around their involvement in county lines, the majority of those who are exploited like this had little idea what would be involved:

“People advertise... 'come and get some money, make some money, come and earn some cash', but they don't reveal what they'll actually be doing. And then they can trick them into joining the county line. They'll say, 'I need you to hold this for me, I need you to take this from A to B'. But they don't realise when they get to B that they're going to be forced to get involved in the actual packaging and distribution of the drugs.” (Young person)

Once involved in county lines, the exploitation and harm they experience is no different to that experienced by young people recruited in person. Interviewees provided examples of cases where young people - men and women - were filmed engaging in sexual acts and threatened that it would be posted on social media: *“They’ll humiliate them, they’ll do something sexual to them, or make them do something sexual...They’ll record it and hold it against them.”* Participants also described instances of debt bondage and threats of violence against young people recruited via social media.

“Any young person who's been involved in this has been [at] extreme risk of violence, of sexual abuse, sexual violence, of addiction, all of that kind of stuff, and also mental health [challenges].” (Young person)

In some cases, those who were recruited online experienced greater paranoia than those groomed in person. A local authority worker described a young person who had never met the people exploiting him. Yet he lived in terror, worried that every new person he met might be involved somehow. Interviewees shared examples of young people who had been moved out of their area by social services after being exploited. But these young people had been recruited via social media, so the county line operators were able to track them down and coerce them to continue and even escalate their involvement.

Social media also changes the reach of county line operators, as they are no longer constrained by geography. A handful of interviewees pointed to cases in which gangs had been able to groom a different demographic of drug runners.

“A lot of the kids are not from disadvantaged backgrounds or broken homes. A lot of them [have] got really lovely families and quite nice homes, but it's where they're online, that social media presence, they're getting groomed effectively into that lifestyle.”

Although social media provides gangs with channels through which they can groom young people remotely, there are still risks for gang elders. Young people recruited remotely via social media are believed to be less reliable than those they meet in person. One young person involved in county lines said *“those are the people that fucking don't last long and that get arrested”*.

Law enforcement, social media and smartphones

Although the police are aware of social media recruitment, they told us there was far more they could do to protect children in online spaces - if they had the right resources. The generation gap between police officers and children in their day-to-day use of tech exacerbates the problem.

“We are really behind the times in being able to interrogate social media. And I know that a lot of our juveniles or young people that are recruited through Snapchat, in particular... that's definitely a theme at the moment. And my way of being able to interrogate that and map that is yeah, it's non-existent really.” (Police officer)

“a lot of police weren't brought up with this kind of technology so a little bit we feel like old dinosaurs, trying to understand what the kids are talking about.”

There was thought to be a large knowledge gap around gaming platforms, with one officer admitting *“that's my weakest point ever”*. It points to a clear lack of social media literacy across law enforcement.

However, the most significant barrier to utilising social media data to protect children from criminal exploitation was said to be a lack of cooperation from some social media companies. SnapChat was identified as the worst offender:

“Our actual intelligence picture nationally is pretty rubbish when it comes to online. And social media is pretty appalling, if I'm honest. But then we don't get much support from platforms such as Snapchat and where they're based outside the UK when it comes to requested data we basically get told to do one.”

“Historically, Snapchat is just the worst app to communicate with as a police officer, because they just don't give you anything. It's really, really frustrating. And people know that. So that's why it's so popular. Because they know that, as users, they're protected by that app... We really do need them on board.”

In contrast, police officers spoke highly of the level of cooperation they received from third parties, including meal delivery and taxi apps, in county lines investigations. However, our police interviewees were clear that, without government backing, the problematic social media platforms would never engage. That would appear to be an important consideration for MPs, as the Online Safety Bill works its way through Parliament.

“That's [accessing data] the challenge for law enforcement. It can only come through legislation.... You know, if there's really strong evidence that people are using any of those apps, to communicate in order to perform the drug deal, and to do the exploitation and all that serious harms that go with that there has to be some kind of a way that law enforcement has access to those communications to protect life.”

Law enforcement & technological advances

In order to tackle county lines, law enforcement agencies have increased their digital forensic capabilities, with new investment in equipment and training to download mobile phone data. That has enabled officers to co-locate two phones, to map movements and attribute dealing activities to individuals higher up the food chain.

By using production orders, under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act), police officers can access up to seven days of data including SMS and Voicemail, although mobile networks differ in terms of the data they can supply. Accessing information on suspects obtaining e-voucher top ups for devices is also a useful source of information, potentially supplying police with the exact location of a top-up, allowing them to check CCTV in the area.

Police officers said cell site analysis software, which can pinpoint where phones are at a certain time, had become essential in tackling county lines gangs. They credited cell site analysis with sparking a 'mindset change' among law enforcement agencies. As a result, new technologies are more likely to be embraced within county lines investigation teams. In some forces, cell-site analysis is now the foundation of almost all such inquiries.

Nevertheless, the starting point of an investigation is intelligence. Police officers said to use any of the tactics they first had to know about the existence of a deal line, with information coming from drug users or concerned members of the public. One police officer explained that their digital forensic work was "reactive rather than proactive" because they would usually "get intelligence and then look at social media, rather than the other way around."

Those involved in county lines gangs were aware that policing remained reactive - and understood how tactics had evolved. Two young interviewees mentioned cell-site analysis saying, "*That's their whole case innit, cell site.*" Others described how law enforcement could track their location or identify bulk messages being sent.

This awareness of police tactics means that those involved in county lines will continue to develop their business models in order to evade law enforcement. One young person currently active in county lines explained that he will now often send the deal line in the opposite direction to the drugs with a runner in order to avoid police being able to locate him using cell site data. Other young people with direct experience of county lines talked openly about the police's reliance on Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) to identify vehicles used by line operators. One participant told us that number plates are now frequently changed to avoid identification. Another young person told us that many gangs send drug runners on coaches rather than driving or using taxis to avoid police scrutiny.

This is significant, because in interviews police officers said that even relatively minor 'tweaks' in the operating models used by county lines gangs can reduce the effectiveness of police tactics. One police officer said even changing the line name can "slow down our response".

He said: "It might take us a few days to work out the new number. And then we just have to work out that continuity between the old one and the new one and then continue the investigation."

Another police officer explained that some deal lines had been set up to divert messages to multiple burner phones. She explained that it makes their investigation "a lot more complicated and a lot more protracted." As soon as the police had evidence on one line controller, they swapped over; police then had to start again in attributing the new line controller to the dealing activities.

Officers were aware that they had only just caught up with how county lines were operating currently.

“We've caught on to it at the tail end wherever it's going...At the moment, we're quite successful at attributing phone numbers and phone lines to persons because we're relying on the burner phones that have been used, and SMS and 2G and 3G signals that are being used. But now, [as] we're moving into more smartphones and WhatsApp and encrypted messaging, that's where we're gonna need to evolve further...It's gonna take time, but the next evolution of our investigations are online.” (Police Officer)

But police do not have the luxury of time to develop the next iteration of their response to the use of tech in county lines and, as a result, the drug gangs remain one step ahead of law enforcement.

*“Young people are so ahead of the curve on this stuff. And they always have been. By the time we get our heads around where they are, they've already moved on to the next thing. It'll be something completely different in six months' time. And, you know, we'll be playing catch up with that as well.” (*Police Officer)*

Lessons for law enforcement

First, there is no room for complacency. The burner phone remains central to the marketing and logistics side of county lines, but the use of social media in the grooming and exploitation process is evolving quickly. Line operators will use any available tool or instrument to minimise their personal risks and will conduct as much of their business remotely as possible.

Second, police leaders must consider the potential impact of their enforcement tactics. Just as the use of test purchase and crack house raids pushed gangs towards the use of burner phones to deliver drugs, recent successes using cell-site analysis to disrupt county lines will inevitably push gangs towards new tactics such as end-to-end encrypted messaging. There are already early signs that customers, including dependent drug users, have access to affordable phones which can offer social media apps with end-to-end encryption.

Finally, law enforcement must prepare for a step-change in the use of technology by criminal gangs rather than it being a gradual process. Mobile phone technology and social media products evolve at pace, and in a highly competitive market, changes in the range of products available can be explosive. Owning a mobile phone became the norm within a year, allowing little time for law enforcement to plan responses to emerging uses of the new tech by criminal gangs. As a result, the county lines model spread rapidly, whereas police tactics were static. It is essential that police leaders are aware of emerging tech and maintain a constant dialogue with the companies involved so plans are in place to respond to new threats.

Both the young people involved in county lines and the police officers charged with disrupting them view the use of technology as a type of arms race. One young person who was involved in county lines described the race between county lines and law enforcement as being “like

Tom and Jerry” but felt that they could “keep out of reach”. Another said: “The police are just gonna keep on getting better at what they do. For us, I think the more they think, the more we think, so the more they do, the more we do.” Police officers agree with this assessment, telling us that they still feel that they are often “one step behind” the line operators.

The days of gangs grooming children by driving onto their estate or to the school gates is giving way to a virtual model, invisible to adults. The gang recruiters now live permanently in the pocket of the young people they exploit through their smartphones. Without the need for face-to-face contact recruiters need not break cover. They could control aspects of a young person's life from 200 miles away. It is for this reason that the ‘franchise model’ of county lines has become dominant so quickly.

In our next ‘long read’, Crest and Forensic Analytics will forecast which emerging technologies the operators of county lines are likely to use - and examines options for redesigning the response from law enforcement should to these threats.