

County lines

Children of all ages and backgrounds are at risk of being exploited by criminal gangs who will use them to transport drugs and money around the country. Understand what county lines is and the signs to look out for.

What is county lines?

- County lines refers to criminal gangs and networks that move drugs and money from one area to another using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of 'deal line'
 - Gangs will groom a child to become a part of the network. This can happen in person, or online via gaming sites and social media apps
 - A child will often be given gifts to create a debt. They may be asked to store or deliver drugs, money or weapons to pay off that debt
 - The gang will often use violence or the threat of violence to trap a child, stopping them from leaving the county lines
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Is my child at risk?

Any child may be targeted. Gangs have targeted children as young as 6 years old.

Young children and girls are targeted as they are less likely to be stopped by the police.

Children from stable or affluent families are also targeted as they are less likely to be known to the police, and may blend in better in the town the gang sends them to.

Children perceived as 'easy targets' are also at risk. A child may be particularly vulnerable if they are:

- › Experiencing poverty or instability at home
 - › Feeling isolated at home, at school, or from friendship groups
 - › Regularly missing school
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What signs should I look out for?

Potential signs that a child is involved in county lines include:

- › Having unexplained money, phone(s), expensive clothes or jewellery – especially if these seem to be out of character or out of their budget
 - › Receiving excessive messages / phone calls and/or owning multiple mobile phones
 - › Going out without explanation
 - › Returning home late, staying out all night or going missing from home
 - › Being secretive about who they're talking to and where they are going
 - › Persistently going missing from school or college
 - › More anxious, aggressive or disruptive behaviour
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- Having unexplained train tickets, or other items that show they have travelled to areas away from home
- Having hotel cards or keys to unknown places
- Coming home with injuries or looking particularly messy
- Taking drugs, or being found with large amounts of drugs on them

While these are the most common signs, **any sudden change in behaviour** could indicate something is wrong.

What should I do if I am worried about my child?

Talk to your child, stay calm and ask open questions about what is going on. Reassure them that you want to keep them safe. Try to be open, honest and non-judgemental – remember, they may be scared.

If you're still concerned, seek help straight away – there are organisations that can help you. You could do any of the following, **but you must tell someone**:

- Contact our school. Ask to speak to the **designated safeguarding lead (DSL)** and explain your concerns to them. They will be able to advise you where to go next
- Report your concerns to children's social care. A social worker will be able to listen to your concerns and help you to protect your child
- 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
 - 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

- [What is county lines? The Children's Society](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/child-criminal-exploitation-and-county-lines/what-is-county-lines)
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- This factsheet was produced by [The Key Safeguarding](http://www.thekeysupport.com/safeguarding): www.thekeysupport.com/safeguarding