

Gangs, Gender, Exploitation and Drug Supply.

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Abstract

Although young people selling drugs is by no means a contemporary phenomenon. The advancements and availability of mobile technology and social media has facilitated the development of a model of drug supply termed county lines. Estimated to generate annual profits in excess of nine billion pounds (Black, 2020). Organised Criminal Gangs systematically target, groom and recruit young and vulnerable people who are criminally exploited to commit criminal acts, notably, the transport and sale of illicit substances between major cities, rural and coastal towns and villages. Most of the available evidence is focused on the roles of males both as victims and perpetrators, and the experiences of females remains largely hidden. This research will analyse how gender impacts exploitation both as victim and perpetrator and whether those exploited are correctly identified and responded to.

Introduction

Child exploitation through the county lines model of drugs supply is a relatively contemporary phenomenon that began to be reported in academia in 2012 [1], gaining political, police and media attention from 2016 onwards [2]. County lines is a police term that emerged to describe the evolution of the drugs market that responded to an oversaturation of dealers in urban cities in the UK. The model witnessed Organised Criminal Gangs (OCGs) groom and recruit young and vulnerable people to transport illicit substances from urban bases to the lesser policed new and emerging markets in rural and coastal towns and villages [2,3]. Despite an awareness of the practice for at least ten years, understanding into the criminal exploitation of children through county lines activity remains limited. Furthermore, what research does exist is focused on the roles of males and literature and evidence concerning the roles of females within organised criminal gangs and county lines activity remains scant. Therefore, this research will investigate how exploitation manifests within the structures of county lines and evaluate whether specific vulnerabilities make a person susceptible to exploitation and whether those vulnerabilities differ between males and females. It will consider gender socialisation and how that influences the perception of exploitation.

Methodology

Research design

The research adopted a qualitative approach for the collection of data through a series of semi structured interviews with a range of geographically dispersed professionals including law enforcement (25%), youth justice services (19%), social care (12%), education (12%) and third sector support services

(31%) who work with young people involved in the structure of gangs and drug supply mechanisms. The research also drew on the professional experience of working in a youth justice service. Each interview was transcribed and analysed thematically through a series of open coding to identify broad themes and latterly through a series of axial coding that identified sub-themes and facilitated the exploration of the relationship between them [4].

Ethics: Ethical approval for the project was granted by Manchester Metropolitan University (41073). The decision to participate in the study was voluntary and a strategy of informed consent was implemented. Standard ethical principles were adhered to including informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, safeguarding, rights to withdraw [5] and adherence relevant to data protection legislation [6].

Research Findings

County lines and criminal exploitation in context: Harnessing the developments and accessibility of mobile technology and social media, OCGs involved in drug supply actively seek to mitigate their risks of interaction with law enforcement by systematically targeting, grooming, recruiting and exploiting young and vulnerable people to transport and deal illicit substances, primarily heroin and crack-cocaine between urban cities and the lesser policed coastal and rural towns and villages [2]. However, it is important to reinforce that young people being exploited and used to sell illegal drugs is not a contemporary phenomenon [7].

'...there has always been the exploitation of children, we used to send them up chimneys, if that's not exploitation I don't know what is...'

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'...kids have always sold drugs...however, there are differences between then and now, and a lot of that is down to how gangs use phones, social media and the levels of violence...'

OCG's operating county lines systematically target, groom and recruit young and vulnerable people into a world of criminal and sexual exploitation, coercion and violence [2,8]. Facilitated by the development and accessibility of mobile technology and social media applications which has undoubtedly granted extraordinary access to young people.

'...a lot of exploitation that we see is done online, tends to be from a sexual point of view, but it is being done criminally more and more. We have a young person who is stealing cars and selling them. It's all arranged using a smart phone...'

The research reinforced the wider literature that suggests criminal exploitation manifests as an imbalance of power where OCG's target, groom and recruit young and vulnerable people to commit criminal acts, notably offences under the Misuse of Drugs Act (MoDA) 1971 for the benefit of the [2].

'...exploitation is a power dynamic between someone who is using someone, in county lines, generally kids, to do something that benefits the abuser...'

It is also crucial to clarify, that the imbalance of power is not limited to OCG's. Indeed, the research established that criminal exploitation can occur from within family and peer groups.

'...criminal exploitation is when young people are identified and are used by more experienced adults or other peers who then exercise power and control to make young people become involved in criminal activity, drugs, vehicle theft, burglaries and violence. It might also include family-based offending where young people are encouraged to deal drugs etc...'

Importantly, the research raised concerns regarding the overriding focus on the term county lines. It was reinforced that there are various methods that children can be exploited, and county lines is just one of those.

'...I find the whole conversation about county lines really interesting. I see it all as criminal exploitation and county lines is one form of that, whereas sometimes the narrative can be the other way round that county lines is the only form of criminal exploitation. What we've seen from practice is that there are new and emerging ways that children are exploited. If we only think about what we know and some of the predominant messages around county lines, we've missed other children...'

Groom, recruit and exploit: Central to the county lines model of drug supply is the systematic targeting, grooming and recruitment of often young and vulnerable people for the commission of criminal activities [2,9]. Facilitated by advancements in mobile technology, OCG's are able to effortlessly project grandiose images of affluence and status over social media and create a fallacy of the monetary rewards generated by involvement [2,8,7,3]. Although any young or vulnerable person can become a victim of exploitation, there are certain characteristics that are evidenced to increase the

risk [2,9]. The consensus among all research participants reflected existing literature, detailing vulnerabilities including age, gender, poverty, disengagement from education, mental health concerns, special educational needs and learning difficulties, young people accessing education in pupil referral units, looked after children, violence within the home, bullying, substance use and parental substance misuse.

'...for me, no 15- or 16-year-old child wakes up one morning and goes, I'm gonna be a drug dealer. They might end up one, but there is a reason for that...'

The identification of vulnerabilities is a pivotal tactic OCG's exploit when targeting a young person [9]. The research identified multiple examples of how OCG's identify and target a vulnerability and how these are exploited for the benefit of those in control. For example, the provision of material goods such as smart phones, branded clothing and footwear which are otherwise unattainable. There were also discussions concerning the levels of poverty, meaning for some, the provision of food was sufficient in ensuring that young people were successfully groomed.

'...every child wants love, that love can be in the form of a new pair of trainers or something that they deem important, but they want love, and that can be easily exploited...'

Arguably, the implementation of the fiscal policy of austerity between 2010 and 2019 by the coalition Government, exacerbated levels of deprivation and effectively removed legitimate opportunities for some young people [7]. Furthermore, the global COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and ensuing cost of living crisis has resulted in a real term reduction in wages and state benefits [10]. The research concluded poverty as one of the main drivers that OCG's seek to exploit. However, although some of the young people groomed to run the lines are financially compensated, the power imbalance between those controlling operations and those recruited into the structure, results in many receiving minimal or no financial reward [3], for some, rather than being compensated financially, they are supplied with clothes or cannabis for personal use [7].

'...the branding of the cost-of-living crisis, I hate hearing about it in the news and the newspapers because it sends an anxiety wave across these kids. Kids are gonna be like, can I ask mum for that PlayStation game, because I know she is struggling. That is an exposure to trauma, that fear, that stress, it makes you different from other kids... you're going into school with an additional set of things you are worrying about...'

Practitioners interviewed reinforced [8] ethnographic study into county lines in Merseyside which provided evidence of some families experiencing poverty turning a blind eye to the criminal activities of their children, because those children were bringing in much needed money into the family home. For others it was detailed how families would be compensated by those controlling operations to interact with official authorities.

'...we've seen mum's not question the £500 being dropped on the table because, do I really want to know, but I need the money...'

'...his older brother has got a debt, so he has got the younger ones working for him... This kid ended up being sent to Middlesbrough to sell crack and heroin and his mum was getting paid not to answer the door to social workers...'

The consensus in the wider literature and the research is one of the main vulnerabilities that is frequently exploited is that need for young people to feel safe, to belong to be accepted by their peers, and to be given protection and status.

'...there is that sense of belonging, safety is a big part of it as well... they come from an environment of high deprivation, and they need that belongingness...'

'...this lad was the son of a known OCG family...he befriended the bully victim online and basically went everybody else leave him alone, he befriended him and groomed him... the lad gained a bit of stature because he was hanging out with the son of an OCG... but he ends up having to work for his dad... he was befriended for the purpose of getting someone to work for his dad... he was then caught with £25K of cocaine and firearms...'

Although there are numerous commonalities of vulnerabilities that are exploited between both genders', there are additional vulnerabilities that are exclusive to females including, experiences of emotional, physical and sexual abuse and involvement in risky sexual activities are identified as increasing the risk of being targeted, groomed and exploited [11]. Additionally, females social and emotional needs are met through the pretence of a relationship [7,9]. [12] provides a personal account of how after being the victim of rape and sexual assault, an OCG groomed her into county lines activity initially through the pretence of a relationship, affording her the sense of belonging and protection that she desired. Once within those structures she was forced into transporting and selling drugs on a county line.

'...she was vulnerable, she thought he loved her, she was under the impression she was in a loving relationship, she did not realise that he was using her, she had no concept of what exploitation was and how he was exploiting her...'

Furthermore, examples where were provided of the vulnerability of the females supported within a female custodial establishment and how their affiliation with OCG's and county lines activity was primarily concerned with providing for their children.

'...it was a roof over her head, to give her children a house, it was monetary. It was almost like a distorted argument in her head, it's ok to be attracted to this gang because I get money and I am providing for my children. It's almost a justification, it's for the kids...'

One of the main concerns among all participants is the narrative that there is choice and agency involved with young and vulnerable people decisions to become affiliated with OCG and county lines activity. It was reinforced that for

many, it is not a choice, it is a lifestyle that they a groomed and recruited into.

'...My experience is that children don't join gangs. They are recruited into them. It's within familial structures. It's within what's expected within the community. So even that language of joining a gang that isn't really an option for many children....'

County lines, it's more than just drugs!: Overwhelmingly there is the perception that individuals involved in the county lines model of drug supply are used to transport and sell illicit substances [2]. Whilst the commission of offences under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (MoDA) is a significant concern, evidence suggests young and vulnerable people are involved in criminal activity that is broader than just transporting and selling illegal drugs [7]. In addition to the identification of young people being used to transport and supply drugs, individuals are also used for the commission of serious violent offences. The systemic violence that accompanies drug markets are well documented [13]. It is argued that compared to the previous local supply model, the involvement of OCG's has resulted in significant increases in serious violence [6], which is in part driven by the competition between OCG's to supply users with the end product [14]. Indeed, official statistics detail how each region of England and Wales has witnessed significant upsurges in serious violence, including a 50% increase in homicides between 2013 and 2018 directly attributed to the drug supply markets, and crucially murder rates of young people aged 15 to 24 have reportedly doubled between 2015 and 2018 [15,16]. Furthermore, it is reported that homicides committed by young people under the age of 18 increased by 77% between 2016 and 2018, and there was an increase of 93% of young people under the age of 15 admitted to hospital as a result of knife attacks between 2012 and 2018 [15].

Of the researcher's professional practice in a Local Authority Youth Offending Service, 40% of the caseload were identified as exploited criminally. It is important to clarify that of that caseload, non were charged with offences detailed within the MoDA, and each were charged with possession of a bladed article in a public place. The research established rather than young people being used to deal drugs, many were used to commit an entire range of offences ranging from the theft of vehicles to the commission of serious violent offences.

'...rather than being used to transport or sell drugs, one of our biggest problems is OCG's requiring young people to commit serious violent offences...it's almost like an initiation...once they have done it, they're in and they're accepted...'

'...it's not just for storing and selling drugs. It could be for handling money, goods, criminal damage. I know people who have had their windows smashed, their nana's windows, or even their dad's...'

The research did, however, establish although the commission of offences were far greater than those depicted in the media, with significant differences associated with gender. For example, males were more likely to be involved in the

commission of violent offences, thefts and sex offences. It could be argued that the disproportionate levels to which males are involved in the commission of serious violent offences including sexual violence is due to the socialisation of gender roles which is contended by feminist theorists that masculinity is associated with physical strength and aggression, and conversely, femininity is associated with submissiveness and physical weakness [17]. [18] details how society normalises and rationalises behaviours including the subordination and objectification of females as an entitlement of masculinity. Within the context of the hypermasculine gang environment, it is argued that the norms and rationalised behaviours extend to the coercion, control and application of sexual violence against females.

The county lines model of drug supply continually evolves to mitigate risk of interference by the police, it is further recognised that the gender bias within the criminal justice system results in females being less likely to come to the attention of the police [11]. Reinforcing the under representation of females that come to the attention of the authorities:

'...it is much bigger than we realise. The boys come to prominence because they get arrested, it goes to court and then it gets reported. The use of females is huge, they sometimes play different roles, sometimes it's easier to evade prosecution so when the media are reporting, they are reporting on the violence of boys jumping out of windows with 200 grams of cocaine down their pants. Females don't always come to the public view, but they are heavily involved...'

Marginalisation hypothesis postulates that within the structure of gang's, females in the main remain invisible and their presence and participation is based on the acceptance and directions of males [19]. Recognising this, the research established OCG's, were more likely to utilise and exploit the perceived invisibility that is afforded to females, and they are used to store weapons and firearms, credit card fraud, transferring of money between accounts, accompanying males and holding drugs when transporting substances and hiring and driving cars. Supporting this, the research concluded how the invisibility of females benefitted county lines operations:

'...seeing them as the key to the success of the operations, moving undetected... like having them sat in the passenger seat of a car, they are less likely to be pulled over....'

The disproportionate application of stop and search against males was also highlighted as a reason why females are used in conjunction with males when transporting drugs to market locations:

'...if you're gonna send a group of lads to [exporting region], the girl might be the one on the train with them that is holding the drugs because she is less likely to be stopped and searched by the police...'

Although there was a consensus among the research participants that the commission of violent offences was in the main a males preserve, the third sector organisations reported increases in referrals of females for anti-social behaviour and serious violence.

It is all about family: There is a wealth of evidence that documents the domestic environment in which a young person resides can have an impact on whether a young person is at an increased risk of gang affiliation and county lines activity. Known protective factors include a supportive, stable and nurturing family. In contrast, factors including family poverty, abuse, violence are known to increase those risks. Although this evidence arguably suggests that young people are at an increased risk from external influences, there is evidence that suggests that families can be complicit in the exploitation of the children in their care [20]. Practitioners in a supportive capacity provided examples of how young people would bring money into the home, and due to the levels of poverty that was experienced, the parents although aware of where the funds originated from, would not question this. Additionally, other practitioners discussed how the levels of poverty that some families experience and the environment in which they lived, parents would encourage young people to become involved in county lines activity. The research established how the peer to peer and street to street county lines model that operated in the region that he provided support to young people at risk of gang affiliation and drug supply, children being encouraged to sell drugs was normalised and encouraged.

'...he asked his mum to get his hair cut so he could go to a party. He was 13. His mum said "fuck off you scruffy little cunt, go out and graft if you want your hair cut, I'm not fending for you, you're getting nothing off me...''

Practitioners also highlighted that for some young people, involvement in OCG and county lines activity was as a direct result of their family's direct association within those structures. For many young people, their family structure was dominated by associations to organised criminal networks. Those controlling the networks were a source of inspiration to young people. Rather than applying themselves academically to progress in a career through legitimate means, they would aspire to be affiliated with those networks.

'...why would they work hard at school to get an apprenticeship as a hairdresser or a car mechanic on minimum wage? The financial motivation is to join those networks, sell drugs, make money...'

'...her family ran the county lines operation; from the age of four she was unknowingly part of that line, doing regular trips to [importing location]... It's not considered exploitation... it's considered family work...'

Furthermore, family was highlighted as one of the main ways in which females enter the structure, not as a victim, but as holding status and controlling operations. Several of the participants discussed instances of male members who operate county lines who have been arrested and sentenced to custody. Female family members including intimate partners, sisters and mothers would be required to step up to ensure the line remained operational.

It's different in Manchester!: Academic literature began to emerge in 2012 detailing a drug supply model that reported OCG's targeting, grooming and exploiting young people to

transport and deal illicit substances, primarily heroin and crack-cocaine from major cities to lesser policed coastal and rural towns and villages [2,15, 3]. Although this is the dominate model that has proliferated around the country, there are regional differences that have been identified both in academic literature and within the research. Densley provides accounts of a model of drug supply in Scotland, that although it fits with the narrative of county lines, due to the geographical disbursement of the country, the model is not a contemporary evolution, indeed, it is described as ‘good old-fashioned drug dealing’. One of the benefits of being able to conduct interviews with professionals that were dispersed geographically was that it highlighted the differences that are experienced between regions. For example, participants located in London discussed the county lines model in terms of young and vulnerable people being targeted and trafficked OT to transport and deal drugs in rural and coastal markets. Participants in Devon and Cornwall discussed the model in terms of being an importing county from London, Birmingham, Manchester and Merseyside.

‘... [operation name] was a county lines investigation that originated in [exporting region] that fed predominately into [importing town] and a few other surrounding areas. There were so many drugs coming in, it was like a scene out of the living dead...’

Participants based in Salford and Greater Manchester highlighted the differences in how young people are targeted, the offences that are committed and how substances are transported and sold. For example, rather than Salford experiencing a significant problem with individuals being trafficked into the region to sell drugs, or trafficked OT, Salford experiences issues with young people being trafficked to local areas and the centre of Greater Manchester, and used to commit serious violent offences.

‘...you find that people are criminally exploited to commit serious violence, and not necessarily for financial gain, more for acceptance. Criminal exploitation in our area is vast, but we don’t get a lot of young people coming into the region. You tend to find if you start dealing on other people’s turf, the retribution can be severe, but a lot of our young people are trafficked out, but it’s not necessarily that far either, it can be a few miles away. It can be other areas of Salford, or to Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester. That is a massive issue for us... That’s not to say that we don’t get children sent away to deal drugs in the typical model, we do, but children used locally is huge...’

One of the research participants from a third sector organisation, discussed how professionals had been sent from London to Manchester to deliver training on county lines, yet the issues that are evident in London do not apply to a lot of what is evident on the streets of Manchester. The young people being supported by the project were described as disproportionately residing in social housing in one of the most deprived regions in Manchester, and the areas that the young people reside do not have a significant issue with OCG’s, but there is still a county lines model.

‘...here it’s peer to peer and street to street, you don’t necessarily have to have kids trafficked out to different regions, but they are still exploited, they are exploited to commit a range of offences, but it’s all kept within their local area...’

Although all participants located within the Greater Manchester region did discuss the county lines model in the traditional context. It was also reinforced that many young people that are targeted, groomed and exploited are not trafficked out of the county. In much the same way as the railway system is utilised in the traditional format, the Metrolink system facilitates the transport of young people across the county. It was also highlighted, that in contrast to young people being identified on the railway system, this is not generally of a concern with the Metrolink system.

‘...Manchester is unique in some ways because we used to think of children going missing down to Devon or Cornwall. We’ve had that for years where kids would go down and sell drugs. Now though, Manchester is such a large area, it’s a big city and loads of towns, you are going to experience criminality, and you are going to get criminality associated with drugs. Metrolink enables kids to be moved, they can be moved to Bury, it’s not that far, the kids don’t go missing, it’s not as identifiable. When you think of county lines and kids being trafficked out, it isn’t always about them being shipped to say, Grimsby, it can happen, and does, but a lot happens within Greater Manchester ...’

Gendered exploitation and female sexuality: While research into gangs has been instrumental in the growth in knowledge, arguably however, this body of research can be criticised for classifying gangs principally as a male phenomenon [21]. Although limited, there is an increase in the availability of evidence that suggests the involvement of both males and females in gang and county lines activity [22]. Furthermore, rather than suggesting masculine and feminine socialisation results in males holding roles that are inherently criminal and females in roles that are predominately defined as a victim, evidence suggests that males can be victims and conversely females can hold positions that contravenes gender assumptions [23,7]. While there is a known intelligence gap regarding the extent to which young people are involved in gang and county lines activity, the available narrative depicts involvement as a predominately male preserve [23], there is the emergence of a body of evidence concerning the involvement of females within the structure of organised gangs and involvement in county lines which confirms females as active participants in the commission of criminality in addition to being victims of serious crimes [11].

‘...we are definitely seeing more of it, there is exploitation of females within county lines, and although there may be differences in exploitation, increasingly, violence is involved...’

The research established how females to commit a range of offences, including the commission of serious violence against rival female gang affiliates and the staged robberies to place them into debt bondage:

'...there are girls linked to gangs in [region], there are older people exploiting them and these young girls are committing serious violent crimes, serious assaults and robberies...'

Although it is estimated that 91% of individuals associated with county lines are reported to be male; it is acknowledged that females are underrepresented in official statistics as both victims and offenders of exploitation [24]. [25] reported that while females are often absent from the narrative regarding involvement in county lines activity, it was evidenced through research with professionals that females were subjected to criminal exploitation through drug supply. The consensus among participants from third sector support services discussed that while referrals were still limited, there is a growing recognition which is reflected in a gradual uplift in referrals for support.

Sexual violence is reported to be a method that is used to recruit vulnerable females into the structure of OCG's and county lines activity, and once females are within those structures, sexual exploitation is used as a method to exercise control and compliance [2]. Females are frequently targeted and groomed through what they perceive as a consensual relationship [11, 26]. Research discusses how males actively befriend young females. Flaunting the prestige and wealth accumulated through active participation in county lines, this is used as a way to attract young females and create the illusion of a relationship.

'...they're coming into our services, often through the boy in what would have been in the past termed the boyfriend or lover boy model. They're in relationships, but there is significant sexual violence within that...'

Evidence suggests that young females in a gang environment are often coerced into sexual activity as an initiation tactic for gang affiliation, which in return affords them with a degree of protection. The young people would often see this behaviour as normalised sexual behaviour. The blurring of consent and normalisation of rape and sexual assault was highlighted by all research participants as a substantial problem. Furthermore, although a female may not initially consent to sexual activity, those committing those acts were reported to manipulate the situation so the female would believe that she did indeed consent, this was then used to reinforce a relationship [26].

'...the level of consent can be confused, especially with females, they don't fully understand, and they are manipulated to believe that they have consented to an action when they haven't really consented at all...'

'...when some sort of sexual assault takes place, that sexual assault can be twisted to, oh, we're in a relationship now... it's those mixed messages of OK, so I haven't experienced it, it's what boyfriends do...'

Moreover, once a young female has been manipulated and exposed to sexual activity, gang members are evidenced to take indecent images and film sex acts. These are then used as collateral to ensure that females remain compliant and perpetuate their involvement [27]. This was further highlighted by all research participants as an integral tactic that is used to exert control over females.

'...they are exploited sexually, they think they have consented, but they haven't, then they will have the indignity of sex acts being recorded digitally. These are then used as collateral. She steps out of line, that video is out...'

'...I've seen lots of cases of plugging or being raped and then it is put on social media...'

Sexual exploitation is principally exercised against females [28], and once within the structure of a gang and involved in county lines activity, females are susceptible to sexual exploitation for financial gain; they are frequently gifted to gang members for sexual activity, and if placed in debt bondage, they are frequently required to commit sex acts as a method of repaying those debts [14, 9]. Sexual exploitation is not just limited to individuals that are groomed into those structures; risks also extend to vulnerable females whose property has been cuckooed by gang members [14]. Sexual exploitation was identified by each participant as being the major risk factor for females. However, it is important to clarify that sexual exploitation is not just a social threat that is experienced by females, and both are susceptible to a multitude of harms and exploitation [29]. Indeed, research conducted by the University of Nottingham (2021) evidenced an increase in young males associated with county lines activity presenting as victims of rape and sexual assault [27]. However, the available evidence and the consensus of the research confirmed sexual exploitation as a phenomenon that disproportionately impacts females.

'... a lot of agencies still think that girls are sexually exploited and boys criminally, it's not that simple, it's a lot more blurred than that...'

'...there is always that crossover line from being involved in drugs and gang activity, criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation, prostitution and those sort of things...'

Moreover, each participant highlighted how both genders are subjected to sexual exploitation when required to transport substances between market locations, the forced concealment and retrieval of the commodity from within the internal cavity of both males and females is a method of sexual exploitation [2]. However, it was reinforced that although sexual exploitation can happen to both genders, typically females are disproportionately impacted.

'...we can't ignore the sexual element of it, the sexual abuse and sexual violence. It does happen to boys of course, we know that, but it is more common with girls... the seriousness of girls and women being exploited is another level...'

'...both are at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation, but the risk of sexual exploitation is greater for girls... if a girl has lost money or drugs, there are major risks of retribution being of a sexual nature... I am not saying that those risks are not there for boys, but they are greater for girls... for boys, sexual exploitation will often be belittling, you know, tied to a chair and someone gets their privates out and whacked them in the face, bullying, stuff like that, whereas girls it's sexual assault, it's rape...'

The use of rape and sexual violence is not just reported to be a tactic that is used to target, groom and exploit females, evidence suggests that that rape is a frequent tool that is used as a method of retribution that is not limited to females that are affiliated with a gang, but also extends to gang affiliated female family members [30,31].

Although it is not contested that females do experience both criminal and sexual exploitation, it is naïve to consider the role of a female in the context of a victim only. Despite [2] concluding that women are involved in criminal gangs in 90% of regions in the United Kingdom, [31] argues that authorities focus on the role of males within those structures because there is a misconception that females are not perceived as a significant threat. However, evidence considers the roles of females within those structures as being complex and multifaceted, with roles varying from victim, facilitators and leaders [30]. The research concluded the overarching narrative of OCG's and county lines is skewed towards the roles of males and the violence that accompanies their participation, and girls as sexual appendages.

'...looking at a gang, we think that it is all boys that are involved, and girls are just sexual playthings, you know, an add on, but girls are involved, but often they are involved in a different way. We are looking for people who bring the violence and girls don't always bring violence, they do things in a different way...'

[32] argues operational roles within the structure of a gang are in the main a male preserve. That is not to say that females are not able to breakthrough the hierarchy. Each participant reinforced that due to the gendered stereotype of females there is a prevailing perception of females being considered as victims. This was highlighted as effectively dismissing a whole demographic of perpetrators of criminal activity associated with gang and county lines activity.

'...women sit higher up in the food chain; I just don't know why society chooses to ignore that element. It's like that notion of if you are in trouble run to a woman, a mum, a nurse, they will help you, they are in a caring role, those myths...'

However, it is argued that gangs can provide opportunities for females to find empowerment and use the structures to challenge gender stereotypes [33]. Reinforcing this, one of the research participants, a Detective Constable in an importing region, detailed how a young female gained employment which facilitated access to vulnerable people and used her position of power to groom, criminally and sexually exploit vulnerable young people in her care.

'...there were two lead roles in our last operation, and one was female. She was exploiting young males and females... the young girls were looking up to her as a role model, she had nice hair, clothes, makeup... then she started to take things away from the young girls, the same way male gang members were doing to boys... she was so good at what she was doing, she started to do the same to boys...she was horrendous and probably the worst out of all of them... she was the most active to sexually exploit them as well...'

Indeed, at the time of writing, [34] released a statement concerning the sentencing of a female who held a senior operating role in an organised criminal gang concerned with the production, importation and supply of illicit substances.

In addition to OCG's exploiting females' sexuality to groom, recruit, exploit, control and punish, the research reflected the available evidence which suggests that females will use their sexuality against males. Shifting from the perception that females are victims of sexual exploitation, females will manipulate their sexuality to entice males. [33] argues media commentary has created a narrative of females being aggressive, dangerous and violent participants that are no longer on the periphery of street violence and are rather depicted as dangerous street gangsters. A point that is reaffirmed in a report commissioned by which documents females as devious, violent and often instigators in intra-gang violence, facilitators of shootings and who use their feminine sexuality by acting as honey-traps [35]. This can be in the context of grooming young males into gang and county lines activity and sex being weaponised during conflict with rival gangs. Sex is often used as a method to set males, predominately rival gang members up to be robbed, to be victims of serious violence, a form of punishment, or to obtain information [31]. Critically, however, it is important to establish that although a female may use her sexuality for ulterior motives, the reality is far more nuanced. There is evidence to suggest that females are coerced and exploited to use their sexuality against the opposite sex, whilst others recognise the potential power that their sexuality affords [31].

'...it's quite common, females are being used to set people up to be robbed, sometimes assaulted, sometimes murdered...'

'...like setting them up...it's easy to bring young men to a trap house with the promise of sex...setting them up to be robbed, or even shot... but then there is the flip side of a woman understanding, actually, I'm pivotal in this and I don't need you...'

Misogyny, it's just the way it is!: For many females there is an unrealistic perception that affiliation with a gang will provide love, companionship, safety and security. Females that are in relationships with male gang members generally experienced lower levels of sexual violence and coercion [36]. However, the reality for many is that females are exposed to sexual assault, rape and violence [21]. It is argued that gang affiliation provides opportunities for males to exert dominance, strength, control and emotional restraint [37], thus enabling them to achieve status, power, respect and autonomy [38,39]. Nevertheless, it is argued that the norms within gangs often replace individual morals, and beliefs with violent or misogynistic attitudes, as collective norms and behaviours that perpetuates behaviours including sexual aggression, objectification and violence against females [29,39]. This is evident in the concerns highlighted by the [25] regarding some of the attitudes that were demonstrated by young males against young females. Supporting this, the research recognised how gang environments experience an amplified misogynistic culture where females are considered expendable commodities and sexual offending is normalised.

'...misogyny is a massive problem, it's obviously a problem in society anyway but especially within gang cohorts, the stereotype you see is, I've never done anything against my mum or my sister, but then they see young girls and women as a commodity...'

Many of the participants discussed how society has a certain perception of people who commit sexual offences against young people, and arguably those perceptions are driven by what is reported in the media such as the grooming scandals in Rochdale and Rotherham and the contemporary development of vigilante paedophile stings that are live streamed over social media.

'...there's a big mist... when we talk about sex offenders and we talk about adult sex offenders who are targeting young girls and women, we quite often have this stereotype that's portrayed as a white older male and quite often what we come across when we are looking at sexual exploitation is that's not necessarily the case. There's a cohort of adult offenders who are relatively young, we're talking in the 20's or 30's who are involved in gang activity. You look at them and think, handsome young man driving a nice car and involved in a specific lifestyle, but they're grooming young girls, and they are doing it for multiple reasons...'

Several of the participants discussed the hypocrisy within the criminal subculture that sex offenders, particularly child sex offenders being condemned as the dregs of society. The consensus among the research participants is that the use of sexual violence and rape against females was a normalised and accepted behaviour and often those offences are committed on young females under the legal age of consent. Yet there was a dominant stereotype that existed around individuals that commit those types of offences.

'...part of the work we do is around harmful sexual behaviour and that can show itself in a number of ways. It's really challenging trying to get the people we work with to admit what it is they are doing is sexual abuse...there is a narrative around a dirty old paedophile, and they don't see themselves as that, but it's not just that, if you are a young person that is sexually exploiting another young person, you're also committing a sexual offence...'

It was further identified how the normalisation of rape and sexual violence within those structures resulted in individuals who commit those offences refusing to acknowledge their conduct.

'...I've had conversations with young people, and they have said you can't let them treat you like that. But it's like because they know you on some kind of level, you're protective of me, your mum or your sister, but if it's an unknown girl it's fair game...it's that normalising narrative...police conviction rates don't help either...'

Let's keep it simple. Denial is the path of least resistance, your word against mine.... it's a distortion of truth, they don't want to see themselves as a rapist, yet they know full well that they have sexually assaulted someone....'

'...she said that she was in her boyfriend's house, and she was in the bedroom with him. His cousin tried to come in and tried to join in stuff, his cousin was laughing...she was there having to do stuff for both of them, and they wouldn't have seen that as rape, they just see it as taking the piss out of her. That's vulnerability and that's rape...'

Am I an offender, or am I a victim?: The research reinforced the wider literature that details one of the central components of the county lines model of drug supply is the exploitation of young and vulnerable people that are used to commit a range of offences for the benefit of those in positions of power [2, 8, 7, 3]. Evidence substantiates that males who participate in OCG and county lines activity are more likely to come to the attention of the authorities as a result of an arrest for a criminal offence or present to health services as victims of serious violence [22]. Concerns have been raised regarding the identification of those that are involved in county lines activity. The HMICFRS report details that individuals who come to the attention of the police for involvement in county lines activity are street-level dealers who are more likely to be controlled and exploited.

'...males are typically involved in more serious criminal activity, a fight, a violent altercation, possession of a firearm, a stabbing...'

Furthermore, statistical evidence confirms that males are more likely to receive a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) referral for suspected criminal exploitation, accounting for 92% of referrals in the first quarter of 2023 [40]. Although the NRM introduced to identify victims of modern slavery and human trafficking, it has been criticised by the Children's society for being inconsistent and not fit for purpose [9]. Reinforcing this, participants provided examples of how young people had been identified as being exploited criminally, however, once an NRM is submitted the mechanism was criticised for the extended length of time to receive a conclusive grounds decision. Moreover, participants expressed their frustration concerning the lack of influence that a positive ground NRM had on a decision to charge.

'...for instance, the NRM, I've yet to see the NRM have a significant impact on the decision not to charge a child...'

'...his exploiters drove down from [exporting region] to [importing region], they bundled him in the boot of their car and drove him back, he was 14, terrified... we referred him, and he got a positive NRM, but he also got a referral order...'

The research further reinforced how a young person who was affiliated with a street gang and exploited criminally had received a community sentence for possession of a firearm. He stressed that for firearms offences there is a mandatory custodial sentence, so a community sentence may appear like the exploitation of the young person was a mitigating factor in sentencing. However, there were deliberations as to whether he should have been sentenced or safeguarded:

'...we had a young man recently who was carrying a firearm for an adult. He got a community sentence which was a good outcome... but should he have been protected or should he have been criminalised...it's difficult...'

Although it is evidenced that both genders are susceptible to exploitation both criminally and sexually, females are more likely to be identified as victims of sexual exploitation [40], and they are more likely to be identified through mental health services and health services that respond to pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases [41]. The consensus among the research participants reinforced the existing literature asserting females are more likely to be identified through health services as victims of sexual exploitation. It was further reinforced that the identification of sexual exploitation, problems arise with criminal exploitation either being not identified or ignored. It was further reinforced that although it was previously highlighted how victims of criminal exploitation are not necessarily afforded their victim status and often endure criminal proceedings, victims identified for sexual exploitation are more likely to receive a victim centred response that has arguably resulted from the increased awareness as a direct result of the grooming scandals in Rochdale and Rotherham.

'...what I'd be interested in is how many girls are picked up for sexual exploitation, or that's been identified first, or alongside criminal exploitation. But because there is a sexual exploitation element, the police are choosing to NFA it or divert it away from prosecution...it's a problem, we have no hard facts, but it's a problem. When you think about CSE we have moved on significantly since Rochdale and Rotherham, and those kids who are victims of CSE quite rightly do get that victim label, where historically they were identified as a child prostitute, and as we know, they can't be a child prostitute...'

For many young and vulnerable people that are involved in county lines activity, there is evidence that they neither recognise the manipulative and exploitative relationships with those that have groomed them, and rather than considering their affiliation with exploiters as negative, they are viewed as a provider of safety, security, belonging and a source of income. Rejecting their victim status, it is argued that for some, their involvement in county lines activity is based upon a mutual arrangement [8, 3, 7]. Evidence further suggests that for some young people that have been impacted by exacerbating levels of poverty and deprivation, participating in county lines activity has provided opportunities for young people to participate in mainstream society and achieve the consumerist goals that would be otherwise unattainable [8]. Confirming how austerity has exacerbated already socially deprived neighbourhoods, removed legitimate opportunities for young people and the perception of financial rewards achievable through participation has resulted in some young peoples perceived coherent decisions to participate in those activities.

'...many of the kids have nothing, they live in poverty, there's a lack of opportunities... They are given the promise of earning money, the promise of a lifestyle...'

It was also reinforced that the complexity of the lives that a lot of people affiliated with gangs and involved in county lines activity means that for some the coercive and violent environment is an accepted way of life.

'...the normalisation of what they have grown up with, domestic violence, and it's normalising a narrative between what is appropriate and what's not...'

One of the main challenges that was expressed was establishing the roles of victims and offenders. One of the central components of county lines is the grooming of young and vulnerable people for a criminal enterprise. Considering this, it would be difficult not to conclude that anyone recruited into those mechanisms are not considered victims. However, issues arise when as often does, the exploited becomes the exploiter, and proceeds to groom and recruit their peers. However, it is important to consider the levels of violence and sexual violence that young and vulnerable people in those environments are exposed to. Arguably the grooming of peers could be considered a method in protecting themselves from further exploitation. A support worker discussed how there were concerns regarding an elder sibling grooming a younger sibling.

'...I was in a strategy meeting concerning two siblings. The older sibling was buying the younger sibling new tracksuit bottoms, and they were saying, he's grooming his brother into it. I was like, or he's desperately trying to protect his brother from being groomed! If he's got bobbly tracksuit bottoms and shit trainers, he's at risk from being groomed, whereas if he looks good, looks fresh, he might look like he's actually being taken care of...'

Finally, males account for the majority of individuals that enter the criminal justice system. For the year ending March 2022, males accounted for 86% of all proven offences committed by children [42]. Furthermore, the [43] although critical of the treatment of women in the criminal justice system, the report did highlight the fundamental differences between female and male offenders and the requirement for gender specific interventions. However, all research participant identified and reflected the literature confirming young males and females within the youth justice system, exploited criminally and sexually have very different needs, yet due to males dominating the youth justice service, interventions were in the main designed to support the majority [44].

'...there are a couple of third sector organisations in [location], but the response is definitely inadequate...'

Practitioners discussed the importance of commissioning gender specific services and how those services differed. Reinforcing the researchers professional experience of working with young males involved in county lines activity, interventions in the main consisted of education and training, sports activities and 'spitting bars' in a music studio. However, the complex lives that are often a critical factor in females being drawn into gang and county lines activity requires a focus on addressing the trauma.

'...there have been six commissioned services, so that's a start... Having access to talking therapies, they've already experienced trauma, the county lines is an add on...'

Conclusion

To conclude, the existing narrative depicts the exploitation of young people to transport and sell illegal substances as a contemporary social threat. The research reinforced how young people have always been used to facilitate the sale of illegal substances, and furthermore, children have always been exploited. However, the research did highlight the differences between historic exploitation and the contemporary issues concerning the use of young people to sell drugs. The wider literature reports how organised criminal gangs have incorporated the advancements and the growth of mobile technology and social media and revolutionised the transactional practice of illicit substances, predominately the Class A substances crack-cocaine and heroin. Evidence details the principal component of the county lines model is the deliberate and systematic targeting of young and vulnerable people who are exploited to commit a range of offences [2, 3]. Organised criminal gangs operate the county lines model of drugs supply in ways that are equivalent to corporatised capitalist ventures with a primary objective on ensuring profits are maximised and risks are mitigated. Providing for the identified vulnerability, gang members proceed to ensure that a person is affiliated into those structures and are exploited criminally, often for the purposes of transporting and selling illicit substances between urban cities and rural and coastal markets, and therefore reducing the risks of those in control of operations interacting with the police [2,7, 3]. Although the county lines model of drug supply is most commonly associated with the commission of offences detailed within the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, notably, possession with intent to supply Class A substances; the research reflected the wider evidence suggesting the commission of crimes to be broader [8,7]. In addition to young people being exploited to commit a wide variety of criminal acts, the research supports the existing evidence that young people are indiscriminately coerced and controlled through the application of extreme violence including sexual violence and rape.

Investigating the vulnerabilities that increase the risk of an individual being targeted to participate in organised criminal activity, the research again reinforced the existing evidence that suggests young people who experience poverty, chaotic upbringings including witnessing or experiencing domestic violence or abuse, individual or parental substance misuse, disengaged or excluded from mainstream education or special educational needs, social, emotional or mental health concerns, victims of bullying or residing in residential care increases a person's risk of being identified, targeted and exploited into county lines activity [9]. Although the research identified that those risk factors were generic for both males and females, it was further established that females exhibited additional vulnerabilities included participation in risky sexual behaviour, experienced emotional, sexual or physical abuse. The research also reinforced the existing evidence that postulates susceptible females are enticed into those structures after displaying a vulnerability that is satisfied through what the female perceives as a loving relationship.

One of the main themes and concerns of the participants who contributed to the study was the deepening levels of poverty and deprivation that have been exacerbated by nine years of austerity and the cost-of-living crisis following the global COVID-19 pandemic and the war in the Ukraine. It was reinforced how levels of poverty result in some young people appearing to make rational and calculated decisions to participate in drug supply as a means to provide much needed income in the family. The research also reflected due to exacerbated levels of poverty; some families do not question the money that is brought into the family. It was highlighted in cases where a young person may appear complicit, this does not mean that they have not been exploited, rather, exploiters have identified a vulnerability and provided for a specific need. It was further reinforced that exploitation is not always concerned with organised criminal gangs preying on young and vulnerable people. Exploitation can and does frequently occur from within the structure of a family. The participants provided examples of how some young people who grow up in environments connected to organised criminal networks or in regions of deprivation where those networks operate are more inclined to view those in control as role models. Family was also highlighted as a critical factor which sees females enter ranking operational roles following incarceration of male members to maintain operations.

The traditional model of county lines emerged from the Metropolitan Police area and is described as the migration of drugs markets from London to rural and coastal towns and villages [2]. However, although this model has proliferated and exists in all regions of the UK, there are differences in different geographical locations. Greater Manchester and Salford were highlighted as having both the traditional format, but also models that do not always involve the transportation of drugs to rural and coastal markets. Salford was highlighted as having significant issues with organised criminal gangs and did not necessarily experience much of a problem with individuals being trafficked into the region, but young people are trafficked, often within the city or into Manchester Piccadilly. It further identified that for some of the most deprived regions of Greater Manchester, the model of county lines that existed was primarily peer to peer or street to street. It was also identified how those models effectively normalised participation in drug supply, and young people were actively encouraged to participate. Furthermore, the Metrolink system in Manchester in much the same way as the railway system in the traditional format, facilitates the transportation of young people effortlessly around the city.

The overarching evidence can be arguably criticised for portraying gang involvement as predominantly a male phenomenon [21]. However, there is a limited body of research that challenges this. Indeed, the research reflected the wider evidence that first suggests that gender socialisation results in the perception of males being inherently criminal, while females are defined as submissive and consequently more likely to be recognised as victims [23, 17]. There also exists a predominant narrative that associates criminal exploitation with males and sexual exploitation with females.

The reality, however, is far more inexplicit. In the main, the research supported in general males are identified as victims of criminal exploitation and conversely, females are identified for sexual exploitation. However, it is critical to acknowledge both genders are exposed to a multitude of harms and exploitation. The nature of transporting and forced removal of the commodities internally is an example of sexual exploitation that is experienced by both males and females. The research established how sex is frequently used to coercively control females that are involved in gangs and county lines activity. Sex was reported to be an integral tactic that gang members exploit for financial gain, and to recoup debts. However, although recognised that sexual exploitation is disproportionately a phenomenon that is experienced by females, it was reinforced that for a minority of females, there is a recognition of the power that their sexuality affords them, and this is used to their advantage. For others, they were exploited to use their sexuality against males.

In support of existing evidence that discusses the coercion of females into those structures through the pretence of a relationship, the research participants emphasised the complications young females often experience including sexual assaults and rape and how their experiences are often manipulated through the fallacy of a consensual relationship. Furthermore, the research reinforced how the recording of sex acts is often used as collateral to maintain control and compliance and perpetuate involvement [30, 27].

Finally, the research analysed the causal link of the victim and offender, and how individuals within those structures are identified and responded to. Evidence suggests that although it is undisputed that young people, irrespective of their motivations for participating county lines activity, it would be hard not to conclude that there has not been an element of grooming and exploitation [8], that does not necessarily result in being treated as such. The statistics support the available evidence and the findings of the research that males are overwhelmingly identified as being victims of criminal exploitation through county lines activity [9, 40]. However, despite being identified and receiving a referral to a mechanism designed to acknowledge their status as a victim, many often endure criminal proceedings resulting in criminal convictions. It was also established that males exploited criminally are more likely to externalise behaviours and present to health care services as victims of serious violence or to police for arrestable criminal offences. However, concerns were raised regarding the identification of females. Initially concerns were raised regarding the perceived invisibility of females resulted in a minority being identified as victims of criminal exploitation. It was reinforced that the majority of females exploited present to health and mental health services and are frequently identified as victims of sexual exploitation. Participants raised their concerns regarding the number of females who have experienced sexual and criminal exploitation, but because of the emphasis on the sexual aspect the criminal component goes unreported or ignored and critically, the correct levels of support are not provided. It was further reinforced that males dominate the criminal and youth

justice system, therefore, the interventions that are designed to support individuals are aimed towards servicing the majority. The research supported the existing evidence that males and females have differentiated needs [43], and although the research provided evidence of some regions commissioning gender specific support services, these remain limited.

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