

County Lines

Public attitude survey by YouGov, commissioned by London Councils

Summary findings

September 2019

Background

London continues to be the dominant urban source of county lines offending.¹ Police leads estimates that there are between 1,200 and 1,500 lines operating nationally, with up to 30 young people involved in any one line. It is estimated that there are at least 283 lines originating in London. The Metropolitan Police Service area is mentioned as the exporting hub of county lines going into 65% of other forces.

Many of the young people exploited by County Lines criminal gangs are London children. While boroughs and the Mayor have taken steps to better plan for and respond to knife crime and serious youth violence associated with, though not exclusively, drugs and gangs, there is more that could be done to understand and safeguarding needs of young people involved.

The police, safeguarding experts and government have increasingly been prepared to challenge the drivers of the drugs trade, notably the use of drugs as a cause of the growth in County Lines. Specifically, Cressida Dick and the former Justice Secretary, the Rt Hon David Gauke, are on record in challenging the public about the impact their drug taking has on those who are caught up in the trade.

To support a better understanding of public understanding about the link between drug taking, County Lines and Modern Slavery, we commissioned new research looking at public awareness of County Lines exploitation and attitudes towards drug taking. The aim was to examine public knowledge of the use of exploitation through County Lines as a form of modern slavery: to both produce a benchmark of attitudes and test approaches to public messaging to raise awareness of the exploitation of young Londoners.

What are Modern Slavery and County Lines?

The Modern Slavery Act 2015 identified four criminal offences that they termed modern slavery. They are slavery, servitude, forced labour and human trafficking. Trafficking is where people are illegally transported from one place to another to work or used in an illegal way (e.g. for sex work, for forced organ donations, to work as a slave). Over the past few years, police forces in the UK have identified and helped to protect thousands of victims of modern slavery. At the same time, they have identified new forms of exploitation. Both foreign nationals and British nationals are being trafficked into and around the country.

Modern slavery has traditionally been linked with trafficking for sexual exploitation and labour exploitation, domestic servitude and trafficking for organ removal. Criminal exploitation is now recognised as another part of modern slavery in Britain, with police identifying children trafficked around the country, from big cities to small towns and vice versa to beg, to shoplift or to grow cannabis. The largest nationality among victims of modern slavery in Britain are British nationals.

‘County Lines’ is a term used for when drug gangs from big cities expand their operations to smaller towns. These dealers will use dedicated mobile phone lines, known as ‘deal lines’, to take orders from drug users. In most instances, the users or customers will live in a different area to where the dealers and networks are based, so drug runners are needed to transport the drugs and collect payment.

A notable characteristic of county lines gangs is the exploitation of children and vulnerable adults. Children are recruited through the use of violence, intimidation, debt bondage and grooming and required to transport drugs, money and weapons and to sell drugs. Many of these children are from London. They are also lured through the use of social media that seems to promise them big rewards. Vulnerable adults in county locations are targeted through force, coercion or debt to offer a place to sell the drugs.

¹ <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/832-county-lines-violence-exploitation-and-drug-supply-2017/file>

Key Findings

Drug Use as a Crime

We asked the public what they considered to be the biggest crime issues in London and across the country. Unsurprisingly, knife violence was consistently reported as the number issue. However, there was a variation between how big an issue drug usage was in London compared to the rest of the UK

Most important crime issues facing the UK according to Londoners

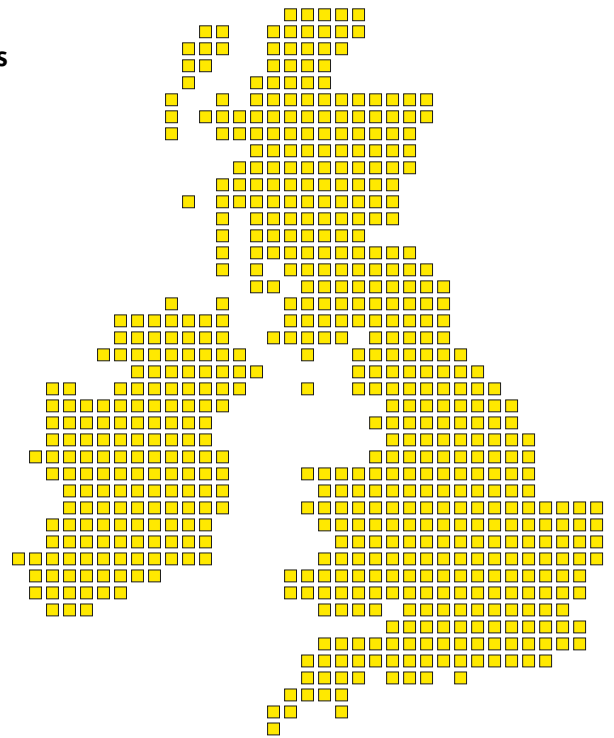
- Knife violence – 78%
- Hate crimes – 50%
- Drug usage – 26% (5th)

Most important crime issues facing the UK according to Brits

- Knife violence – 75%
- Drug usage – 39% (2nd)
- Hate crimes (34%)

Most important crime issues facing London according to Londoners

- Knife violence – 82%
- Hate crimes – 42%
- Drug usage – 29% (4th)



The Damaging Impact of Drug Use

Unsurprisingly, in testing attitudes of Londoners towards drug taking, our research revealed a high level of negative opinion, including:

- People who take drugs don't think about how they get their drugs or where from – 76% agree and 11% disagree.
- Drugs are damaging our society – 72% agree and 18% disagree.
- People should be able to take drugs without worrying about the consequences – 21% agree and 70% disagree.

We also tested opinion towards whether drug users were aware of or cared about the damaging affects of the producing/supply, showing that the public thinks:

- Drug users are not aware of exploitation and violence that occurs in the production/ distribution process
 - Londoners: 58% agree and 25% disagree.
 - Across the UK: 50% agree and 32% disagree.
- Drug users do not care who is involved in supplying them
 - Londoners: 75% agree and 12% disagree.
 - Across the UK: 83% agree and 7% disagree.

Very surprisingly, there appears to be a dichotomy between the decision to take drugs and the likelihood of making ethical consumer choices. We asked respondents about their drug use. 75% of those who had taken drugs in the last 12 months said they have stopped buying goods or services because they felt or suspected that they conduct their business in an unethical matter. This is notably higher than those who have never taken drugs – 53% said they have stopped buying goods or services for this reason.

Awareness of County Lines

We wanted to gain an understanding of how much the public understood about County Lines and, related to this, Modern Slavery. This revealed a surprising, and substantially different level of awareness between the two.

Awareness of issues in London – a quarter (24%) of Londoners have never heard of County Lines. In comparison just 2% have never heard of Modern Slavery.

Notably, in terms of awareness, Londoners said:

- Modern slavery
 - 5% know a lot
 - 65% know a little
 - 23% heard of it, but know nothing about it
 - 2% have never heard of it

Londoners are more likely to feel that modern slavery is a very serious problem in the UK (40%) or London (35%) than in 'their' local area (9%).

- County Lines:
 - 6% know a lot
 - 40% a little
 - 24% heard of it, but know nothing about it
 - 24% never heard of it

Londoners are more likely to feel it is a very serious problem in the UK (44%) or London (39%) than in 'their' local area (14%)

Changing Opinion

Having been presented with information about Modern Slavery and County Lines, the largest shifts in opinion (statistically significant) have been around Londoners agreeing that drug users should take responsibility and in being more likely to encourage people stop taking drugs:

- Recreational drug users should take responsibility for supporting the illegal drugs trade – 65% (of which 31% strongly agreed) agree increased to 73% (of which 40% agreed)
- I would encourage people to stop taking drugs if I knew that people were being harmed in the process of production and supply of the drugs – 75% agree (of which 38% strongly agreed) increased to 79% (of which 46% strongly agreed).

There remains strong agreement that:

- People who decide to take drugs should consider the impact of how drugs are manufactured/produced and its impact on others – 83% agree at start (of which 38% strongly agree) versus 86% agree at the end (of which 50% strongly agree).
- Drug users turn a blind eye to exploitation that occurs in the production/distribution process so they can take their drugs – 80% agree at the start (of which 37% strongly agree) versus 82% agree at the end (of which 45% strongly agree).

Critically, those who have used drugs in the last 12 months were significantly more likely to agree with the following opinions after being presented with information about County Lines.

- Drug users are not aware of exploitation and violence that occurs in the production/distribution process – 55% agree at the start versus 68% at the end
- Recreational drug users should take responsibility for supporting the illegal drugs trade – 39% at the start compared with 52% at the end.

Tackling Demand for Drugs

We tested support for statements made by the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and the former Justice Secretary in relation drug taking.

- 80% support (50% strongly) the former Justice Secretary, the Rt Hon David Gauke's position that "People who snort cocaine at middle-class dinner parties should feel 'guilt and responsibility' for a surge in deaths on the streets."
- 69% support (47% strongly) Cressida Dick's position that "There is this challenge that there are a whole group of middle-class – or whatever you want to call them – people who will sit round ... happily think about global warming and fair trade, and environmental protection and all sorts of things, organic food, but think there is no harm in taking a bit of cocaine. Well, there is; there's misery throughout the supply chain."

In terms of how to tackle drug use, we used the poll to test different approaches.

Substantial numbers of Londoners felt that campaigns on raising the awareness of County Lines would be most effective if they focused on the impacts on children and young people being groomed by drug gangs and then exploited to transport and sell drugs (49%) and the criminal exploitation of children and young people (42%).

Londoners felt that the following would encourage recreational drug users to change their behaviour and stop buying drugs:

- More awareness of how their purchases cause harm to British children and young people – 47%.
- More awareness that their demand for recreational drugs including cannabis encourages the trafficking and enslavement of British and Vietnamese young people – 44%.

Conclusions

Unsurprisingly, significant numbers of people have a negative view about drug taking.

However, there was a significant lack of awareness of County Lines, despite significant and widespread media coverage during recent months. There was a much more substantial level of awareness of Modern Slavery. This points towards the need to do more to raise awareness of the use of Modern Slavery within County Lines criminal exploitation. Furthermore, given the relatively big difference in relative level of concern about drug usage as a crime priority for London compared to knife violence, there appears to be little connection made being made between drug use, drug trafficking and gang related knife violence.


Linked to levels of awareness about County Lines, there were very significant differences in the extent to which people think that Modern Slavery or County Lines are problems in their local area, compared to being a problem in the UK or London more generally.

Again, surprisingly, when asked, people who have taken drugs in the past 12 months were more likely to have made a decision to stop buying goods or services because they felt or suspected they conduct their business in an unethical manner.

In terms of changing opinion towards drug taking, significant shifts appear to be achievable when there is more awareness of the impact of County Lines on young people and the use of Modern Slavery. Notably, at the end of the poll, those who have used drugs in the last 12 months were significantly more likely to agree that recreational drug users should take responsibility for supporting the illegal drugs trade (39% at the start compared with 52% at the end).

Finally, substantial numbers of Londoners felt that campaigns on raising the awareness of County Lines would be most effective if they focused on impacts on children and young people being groomed by drug gangs and then exploited to transport and sell drugs (49%) and the criminal exploitation of children and young people (42%).





London Councils
59½ Southwark Street
London SE1 0AL
www.londoncouncils.gov.uk

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