

European Conference on Drug-Related Violence

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**Vulnerability &
Policing Futures**
Research Centre

Drug Market Related Violence, the UK County Lines phenomenon and Implications for Policing

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The ground to be covered

- Findings from previous research
- Latest findings from new research on County Lines
- Implications for policing

- **County Lines:**
 - OCGs and gangs involved in exporting illegal drugs [heroin and crack] into one or more importing areas using dedicated mobile phone ‘lines’.
 - Often exploit children and vulnerable adults and use coercion, intimidation. Associated with high levels of violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.
 - Frequently involves ‘cuckooing’, where the home of a vulnerable person is taken over in order to establish a base for illegal drug dealing.

Features of drug-markets associated with violence

- Local markets where resident dealers and purchasers know each other associated with less violence than public markets, where people are anonymous and there is no investment in honest transactions.
- Young dealers associated with higher levels of violence
- Intensive law enforcement can increase suspicion of collusion and associated violence.

Features of drug-markets associated with violence

- Maturation of drug markets lead to reduced violence, as relationship develop.
- Similarly, stable markets ('business model'), with clear systems and lines of authority less violent than emerging, chaotic markets ('free-lance model')
- Open markets associated with more violence than closed
- Dramatic change in US and UK in % of markets that are open, associated with use of mobile phones – delivery model.

Features of drug-markets associated with violence

- Markets where final deal is made between user-dealers and users associated with less violence – not interested in expanding their role or protecting reputation.

Impacts of enforcement

- Drug markets extremely resilient to enforcement efforts. Much enforcement effort based on happenstance and informants – has led to harvesting ‘low hanging fruit’ only.
- Dealers taken out of markets tend to be quickly replaced, often with increased levels of violence
- 2011 review found large majority of studies to demonstrate adverse impact of drug law enforcement on Drug Market Related Violence (DMRV)
- Since then, evidence from the US suggests that some ‘Ceasefire’ initiatives associated with drop in violence – targeted violence and overt drug dealing. Message: ‘to continue selling drugs, you must avoid violence and stay out of the street’.

Harm reduction approach: forces need to (Curtis and Wendel, 2007):

- Accept that enforcement cannot eliminate drug markets but can shape them to reduce violence and disorder
- Turn a blind eye to low violence delivery markets;
- Focus on violence and firearms above trafficking/supply;
- Policing focus should be on incapacitation of violent actors, rather than amount of drugs seized;
- Violence/firearms should always bring heavier sentences;

A national study of police responses to criminal exploitation in drug markets

- 2-year study: May 2022 to May 2024

Phase 1

Initial scoping survey of County Lines and related vulnerability policing in all 45 territorial UK police forces, plus British Transport Police.

Phase 2

‘Deep dive’ Rapid Appraisals in three specific force/safeguarding partnership areas. Interviews with people with lived experience of county lines, police officers at varying levels of seniority and key safeguarding partnership personnel (statutory and non-statutory)

- Findings that follow focus mainly on interviews with key police staff in 44 out of 45 forces in England and Wales; but also PWLE.

Nature and extent of DMRV (drug market-related violence)

- Police and PWLE accounts often contained more or less graphic accounts of shootings, stabbings and attacks with other weapons such as machetes. A number of forces referred to murders that were related to OCGs:
 - *We had two murders, as I mentioned, in fairly quick succession in 2016 and 2017. As a result of that, as a force, we were really proactive in our response to disrupt those groups and other groups around [PO]*
- Some PWLE a gave disturbing accounts of witnessing accounts of attacks with knives, hammers and machetes.
- Much violence and threat of violence went unreported to the police or resulted in no charge.

Who's involved in DMRV

- A number of interviewees referred to the involvement of young people in violence
- This could be instrumental, in terms of progressing up the CL ladder or explained in terms of lack of self-control
- Urban OCGs were implicated in much of the most serious violence.
- One city in the North of England was particularly associated with serious CL DMRV. The notoriety of such OCGs in this and other large cities in the UK could result in them moving into town markets unimpeded.

Who is involved in DMRV? contd

- More often than not, the appearance of new CLs in local drug markets was associated with violence. For example:
 - *we have seen some really, really violent crime clashes when groups from outside of the area...come in.*
- However, interviewees also referred to local OCGs ruling the roost in some areas:
 - *...think there's probably more fear around the Albanian OCG members in [seaside town] than there is some of the county-line activity...*
- Violence also occurred between local drug dealers and between dealers and users.

Functions of violence

- Police officers described how violence could be a message to other potential competitors.
- However, when the message was picked up by the police, this could be a problem:
 - *it's not useful because the more violence, weapons, bad stuff going on, the more likely you are to draw police attention.*
- There was therefore a tension between needing to demonstrate ruthlessness to potential competitors and wanting to avoid police involvement.

Lack of violence

- Of the 33 forces where the interviewee discussed DMRV, a third (11) referred to it not being a significant problem in their area.
- Many described a lack of 'turf wars' in their areas, and a lack of associated violence.
- Where there plenty of demand, there could be plenty of trade to go round and no need for conflict.
- Others referred to some gangs having been around for long periods of time and an associated lack of trouble.
- In one mid-sized city, there was an understanding between sellers.
 - *Whereas other cities you've got rivalry, and turf war, and things like that, there is a bit of turf war here, but we don't see much violence. So it's like if one runs out they'll recommend another OCG that you can buy from. So there seems to be a bit of a, I suppose like shall we say gentlemen's agreement that they don't step on each other's toes, and there's no violence involved.*
- One explanation given for drug market peace was the extent of online relationships , whereby addresses were not known.

- In other areas, ironically, drug market peace was achieved through the threat of violence. Powerful local groups could prevent external lines coming in, either through their reputation or through occasional violent acts that sent clear messages to others.
- Given the police's inevitably partial view of drug markets, violence and lack of violence were often hard to predict and hard to understand.

in the past we've had up to 10, 12 county lines operating in that small environment without much violence attached to it. For the life of me, I don't know why that is. You would expect to see more violence, you would expect to see gangs or warfare...

- Interviewees from 20 forces talked about their approach to enforcement
- Many spoke about their overall strategic approach in terms of policing CLs, with the aim of shutting them down.
 - *So Home Office have set a very specific set of targets for us as a force to roll-up nearly 700 county lines, drugs lines. So my day-to-day responsibility is to ensure that we've got an effective plan, and effective investigations in achieving those targets...*
- The use of 'traditional' vs disruption tactics was an issue mentioned by a number of officers. Traditional approaches involved investing considerable resources in covert operations, then arresting and prosecuting suspects. This could take very long periods of time.
- Smaller forces with limited resources favoured disruption – preventing CLs from becoming established. This could include the use of civil orders to prevent people being exploited.

- A minority of interviewees demonstrated an awareness of the limits of enforcement:
 - *If you disrupt the market, so if you take out a line, you create a situation where there's often violence because of the disruption of the market, as people, competitors come into the market.*
- One force in particular demonstrated an awareness of how drug markets might be targeted in order to reduce violence and other harms.
 - *The drug supply model isn't stupid. It understands it gets targeted for certain reasons. When we associate that with publicity, safeguarding work, awareness raising amongst peers and partners, etc., that message filters out, and the operating models change. They stop using as many children and vulnerable adults. They stop using the levels of violence because they know it attracts attention. Ultimately, it's a business model, and they look at risk and reward, and if the risks outweigh the rewards, they change their business model to make it the other way around...*

- Previous research suggests that enforcement cannot eliminate drug markets but can shape them in order to reduce violence and disorder. This can entail:
 - Avoiding taking enforcement action against low violence drug markets, including user-dealers who are associated with lower levels of harm;
 - Targeting behaviours such as violence and involving young and vulnerable people, above other enforcement targets such as drug seizures;
 - Seeking to localise and stabilise drug markets
- County Lines are often associated with high levels of violence. However, there is great variation across England and Wales, with many areas where drug markets appear to be relatively free of DMRV.
- There is a pressing need to get a better understanding of why such variety exists and how policing can influence levels of DMRV.



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Thank you