

## **Exploring County Lines: Criminal Drug Distribution Practices in Scotland**

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of 'County Lines' denotes an exploitative type of illegal drug distribution and dealing criminal enterprise that is indicative of the development of new strategies to underpin criminal markets in Britain. It is a growing phenomenon characterizing the evolution and working of drug distribution networks in contemporary Britain which often establish 'nests' in the homes of vulnerable persons domiciled within drug traffic hubs. This article draws upon qualitative data generated from interviews with active and former offenders and members of intervention agencies in order to understand more about the denizens of this embryonic criminal world.

## INTRODUCTION

Scotland has an acute illegal drugs problem, which intersects with organized crime and criminogenic environmental conditions where the agency of those involved is constrained by cultural and situational contexts (Dickenson and Wright, 2015). Illicit drug usage and criminal supply networks are both concentrated and diffuse (Scottish Government 2008, 2015), with high rates of violence and intimidation defining the culture of drug markets including 'County Lines' (McDonald, 2018; Stone 2018; National Crime Agency, 2017). Police and government agencies describe 'County Lines' as the contemporary drug dealing practices of criminal gangs migrating their business to environs lying outside of the main urban conurbations (HM Government, 2018; National Crime Agency, 2017) through the coercive use of children and teenagers doing the grunt work of the drug mule, trafficking Class A drugs (crack, cocaine, heroin) into rural areas.<sup>1</sup>

This official conceptualization occludes the actual complexity of County Lines which to some extent pre-exists this official labelling, as illegal drugs have always been marketed throughout the UK; a more accurate analysis acknowledges that there are changes taking place in the shape and provision of illegal drug supply networks (Coomer and Moyle, 2018). Anonymized mobile phones combined with text messaging characterize a technologically dynamic nexus of County Line criminality. These anonymizing communication platforms help extend criminality outside export hubs, enhancing the resilience of the criminal enterprise to detection by law enforcement agencies (National Crime Agency, 2017: 3). County Lines operatives exploit failings in the care system and recruit vulnerable individuals, offering them money and a sense of belonging at a time in their lives where feelings of rejection are likely to be oppressive and stigmatizing (Hudek, 2018). As County Lines criminal operatives, they are exposed to violence and coercive abuse represented in a form of illegal governance famously known as 'code of the street' (Anderson, 1999). Victimization rates are higher for young males than their demographic counterparts; vulnerability is intensified for youths living in neighborhoods accustomed to violent gang activity and codes of informal policing (Foley et al., 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/children-drug-mules-uk-thousands-county-lines-gangs-vulnerable-expanding-rural-britain-seaside-a8080001.html> (downloaded: 2/12/2018).  
[https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/bbcthree\\_britains\\_teenage\\_drug\\_runners](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/bbcthree_britains_teenage_drug_runners) (downloaded: 2/12/2018).

This empirical study explores County Lines in Scotland (NCA, 2017). Drugs-associated crime in Scotland is among the highest in the world (McCarron, 2014: 17), There are an estimated 200,000 problematic drug users, 600,000 recreational drug users and 40-60,000 children affected by parental drug abuse misuse (Casey et al., 2009). Densley et al. (2018) found drug supply in Scotland had developed significantly over the previous 10 years: OCGs in the country were, until recently, restricted, extended-family operations around Glasgow, where access to the 'higher echelons' of the criminal underworld was controlled by esteemed criminal individuals with authority to grant entry to this illicit trading. The trafficking of vulnerable, sometimes homeless, children and youths to conduct drugs sales in areas beyond their hometowns is a new development to which child welfare bodies are alert, estimating 4,000 children in London are implicated (Stone, 2018; Children's Society, 2018). The Scottish National Party pledged to make Scotland 'drug free' by 2019 (Scottish Government 2008). To achieve this ambitious objective the Scottish Government's (2015) Serious Organized Crime Strategy (SSOCS) focuses on dismantling criminal drug supply networks. Police Scotland estimate over 160 domestic Organized Crime Groups (OCGs), including those involved in high level organized crime and drugs distribution (mostly centrally situated in the West of Scotland). However, as Jock Young (2004) recommends, we should be cautious about the "numbers game" of this orthodox representation of criminality and the OCGs. Young argues that it is inherently difficult to categorize criminality through a lens of "scientific truth". The reality of crime is messier and more fluid; 'liquid' conditions are emerging as characteristic of County Lines, including its flexible cuckooing practices of exploitation by heroin and crack cocaine dealers of local populations, especially in areas with known populations of drug addicts (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Spicer et al., 2019).

### **Organized Crime Groups and County Lines**

Academics and law enforcement authorities conceptualize the UK drugs market as a hierarchical pyramid. This pyramid is compartmentalized: international, wholesale, and retail-level distribution (Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007). Markets are further differentiated as open, semi-open or closed trust-based markets (May and Hough, 2004). The way drugs are distributed tends to correspond to the level at which actors operate through the pyramid. Most of the actual drug transaction though occurs at the lower end of the market, in communities, often by non-gang affiliated social dealers operating in friendship networks. Yet, commercially motivated 'proper dealers', the focus of the current study, are more likely to be organized into associational criminal structures, small criminal groups or gangs, for whom engagement in illicit enterprise is integral to a collective identity (Densley et al., 2018; Pearson and Hobbs, 2001; von Lampe, 2016). To support their commuting to provincial markets, often these criminal groups commandeer the homes of vulnerable individuals such as adults with mental health problems or disabilities, those with little support networks, or drug addicts (Spicer et al., 2019). These 'cuckooed' homes are then used as operational bases from which young recruits can be sent back and forth, at times staying on site for a number of weeks to sell drugs, oversee money deposits or even weapon storage (Briggs, 2010; Coomber and Moyle, 2017; Spicer et al., 2019). Customers are contacted via a single Deal Line (DL), with promotions or limited offers being advertised through aggressive text messaging as an incentive to entice customers, even loyalty cards are offered in some cases.

Stone (2018) describes a 21-year-old Birmingham man sentenced to 14 years imprisonment for trafficking vulnerable children aged 14-15 to conduct drug deals from a squalid flat inhabited by heroin users located in Lincoln, 100 miles distant. Some County Lines dealers may 'holiday' in host towns overnight, or just undertake a working day then return to the hub location, and not necessarily as gang members (Coomber and Moyle, 2018: 1324, 1324). Whilst diversity existed in terms of how cuckooing was conducted, it consistently allowed out-of-area groups to remain around the clock in new markets, and whilst some victims saw it more as 'renting' their place, with the passage of time harm arose (Coomber and Moyle, 2018: 1337). County Lines are linked by official sources to increasing knife crime and homicides in rural communities (HM Government, 2018).

McLean et al. (forthcoming) suggest that while numerous factors play a part in this process, much of the knife crime can be related to urban gangs fighting proxy wars in distant communities. In some British cities the demise of employment opportunities and weakening of community cohesion will trigger strain that may surface in recourse to the use of violence as a form of street capital enabling criminal governance. Local youths may also respond to the fear of crime by carrying weapons for status and protection (Holligan et al., 2017). Without the availability of recourse to the legal system, grievances and personal slights arising in criminal networks are resolved through codes of violent retribution and notions of natural justice (Coomber and Moyle, 2017; Densley, 2013). Exploitation is central to County Lines drug distribution and is facilitated by vulnerability associated with the effects of alcohol or substance dependencies, vulnerable single mothers and the elderly (Spicer et al., 2019). A source of the vulnerability of "privileged" youth is grounded in complex pressures surrounding poor access to engaging in extra-curricular activities, meeting achievement norms, parental criticism, exposure to paternal depression, weak parental attachment and limited supervision by parents or others of risk-taking routine activities.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This article draws on data from two qualitative studies. The first data set originates from research conducted between 2012-2016, as part of the first author's qualitative study exploring gang organization as a means for gang business. Historically the West of Scotland demonstrates embedded gang culture (McLean, 2018) and retains 70% of Scotland's organized crime (OC), making the region ideal for conducting research and exploring our research goal. Participant criteria included: (a) having participated in group offending; (b) having engaged in criminal behavior defined by Police Scotland as serious and OC (Scottish Government 2015); and (c) being over 16 years of age. Ethical approval was granted by the researcher's university. Participants were initially accessed via outreach projects.

Practitioner outreach workers acted as gatekeepers. Due to difficulties associated with accessing 'hard-to-reach populations', given participation in serious OC crime, only 12 participants were initially recruited (Becker, 1963). Including 5 gatekeepers, yielded a sample size of 17. Additionally, snowball sampling was deployed; Becker (1963) suggests this strategy is effective when the sampling frame is naturalistically highly restricted. This yielded a further 23 participants, making a total of 40. The participants were aged from adolescence to mid-40s. All except two were male. All considered themselves indigenous,

although not all were ethnically Caucasian. All were raised in, or were currently living in, the Glasgow conurbation. Qualitative interviews (typically one hour and mostly one-to-one) allowed our participants to convey their subjective understanding of the roles they played within gang/group organization and criminal activities. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, analyzed thematically and, in keeping with qualitative writing conventions, are presented as a narrative below with illustrative extracts from the interview data used to aid the authentic presentation of “voices” within our selected framework consisting of four themes.

The second data presented comes from a follow-up study carried out between 2017-2019. Some outstanding leads remained from the first study due to time restrictions and the exclusion of many potential interviewees on the grounds of the set criteria, so the follow-up study criteria were more inclusive to allow for leads to be pursued. The criteria were set as: a) participants must be, or have experience of being, involved in what Police Scotland identify as serious and organized criminal activity; or b) be involved in agencies seeking to reduce OC harms; or c) have been significantly affected by OC. In addition to outstanding leads, several charitable organizations working with (ex)offenders seeking to desist from crime were also contacted. This combined approach of purposive and snowball sampling eventually yielded a set of 38 interviewees aged between 14-55 years. 30 interviewees were offenders, 8 of whom were female. Excluding 3 male participants<sup>2</sup>, who identified themselves as neither white nor Scottish, nor having held anything other than temporary residence in Scotland, all other participants identified themselves as indigenous, although not all were white or Caucasian. Participants were typically interviewed in groups numbering between 2–5. Only interviewees in the group of 5 were 16 years old or younger. The participants meeting the second criteria and third criteria numbered 8. 5 were practitioners (4 males, 1 female). 3 (2 males, 1 female) were members of the public. Again, group interviews were preferred. Several interviews were also conducted using mobile devices and apps such as WhatsApp Messenger, Viber and other IT devices. The voice note option was frequently used when this available. Most participants (apart from the three detailed in footnote 2) lived in and around the West Coast and Central Belt, although three lived in the Northern of Scotland and one lived in the Scottish Borders. Interview topics varied and discussed OC, drugs supply, and the distribution of illegal goods, including firearms and other commodities.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Dangerous cartographies**

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<sup>2</sup> The 3 in question were from a major English city but made regular trips and occasional temporary stays in Scotland. 2 identified their origins as 2nd generation immigrants from the Caribbean region, the other made no such declaration. They were interviewed in a group of 3 which lasted approx. just under 30 minutes. A Scottish contact was present at time of interview but was not involved in the interview process on this occasion.

The UK is predominantly an end-user of drugs, except for cannabis, which is often produced locally (Densley et al., 2018). Consistent with UNODC (2016) data, respondents reported that heroin comes in overland from Afghanistan, routed through Turkey and the Balkans, or transported by boat or plane from Pakistan. Cocaine entering the UK originates in South America, transported via Jamaica, North Africa, and Spain. Ecstasy and synthetic substances arrive from The Netherlands (SOCA, 2009). International importation into Scotland directly is uncommon, according to participants who maintain that points of drug entry are in England or Northern Ireland. Don, who collects for a large wholesale SOCG states:

‘[Individual X from English OCG] always meets me .... [He doesn’t] meet us half-way or nothing. I drive right to [Merseyside area] .... [we don’t always rendezvous] at same place.... I hand over [money], no[t] to him in his hands... [I] put it somewhere... mostly [in his] car trunk... [or] leave it [at arranged location] ... [and] he leaves with it.... [once back in Glasgow] I make a drop off to [an associate], and they hold onto it.  
– Don

By avoiding possessing large cash sums, they may circumvent arrest or victimization by other criminals during drug handling. Police Scotland data (Scottish Government, 2015, 2016) and studies by McLean, Densley, Deuchar (2018) and Densley et al. (2018) suggest that the Scottish drugs market has changed considerably in the past decade, giving rise to a dual model of drug distribution characterizing Scotland’s Illegal Drug Market (IDM): one for the West coast, and one for the remainder of Scotland. Duality of this type is explicable in terms of a well-established supply line, disproportionately large population, an ongoing gangsterism coupled with the existence of over 160 SOCGs predominantly operating in IDMs around Glasgow; it is likely that the nature of the social ties in the areas involved lack a “collective efficacy” thus enabling criminal victimization to access recruits and impose the threat of violence (McDonald, 2018). Supply networks throughout the rest of Scotland are traditionally either small independent importers or from lines connected to the West of Scotland:

‘Some yain’s (people) do their own wee runs like. [Drugs] up here [in northern Scotland] tend to come from like Glasgow, or through [the city] one way or another for most part from what I know.’ - Steven

Steven illustrates that traditionally drugs supply into rural villages and towns throughout Northern Scotland stem from independent importers or lines associated with Glasgow and the West. Many SOCGs share criminal networks and supply networks, thus necessitating a need to work with one another, often reluctantly, as well as alternative gang formations in the West (McLean, 2018). This is particularly true of lower level SOCGs and other gang typologies which tend to have similar supply lines, despite being in direct competition. David explains:

‘[Those involved] in high-end drug distribution basically control the market...you always hear of [the same names] .... Everyone works for them, no[t] always directly mind you. Most don’t even know they get their [drugs] off them. [SOCGs] start using violence to keep [out] anyone who tries to muscle.’ – David



As David suggests, high-end SOCGs are stable in terms of a core of criminals whose hegemony denies entry to others, and they are a significant employer of those who deal and distribute at a street level. Such conditions have regularly resulted in ‘tit for tat’ intra-gang wars, which have spilled over to gangland violence on the streets of Glasgow and surrounding communities when negotiations, arrangements, and partnerships collapse. Additionally, a nexus of exploitation exists in the recruitment of vulnerable youths, which is recognizable to opportunity theorists in the patterning of criminal-victim relations (McDonald, 2018). Maintenance of control through deployment of violence also provides criminal signaling, to ‘insiders’ within established markets, of the consequences of betrayal or disloyalty. Victimization is omnipresent in the ethos of the street capital utilized by the controlling drug distributors to maintain privileged positions within a volatile criminogenic micro-world.

### **Evolutionary drivers of dealing dispersion**

The volatility attached to the complex nested nature of drug crime suffers from the ‘liquid modern’ nature of society, which is impacted by globalization. Some environs, over recent decades, have become saturated with drug dealing and addiction through such a trajectory (Hales and Hobbs, 2010). Paul and John recalled the 1980s, a time of national recession and Thatcherite reform of public welfare provision:

‘Too many suppliers [in Glasgow conurbation]. I was like “fuck this am outta this shit pit”. Slaving for so little, man.’ - Paul

‘Years [ago], [in] the 80s [there was a] drug epidemic. Heroin mostly... resulted in the [local] drug wars [in Scotland]. Basically, drugs took off and were flooding the streets. A few big [players] fought it out for control of the market in [these communities] .... [currently it is] even worse [with] every second street has [one] dealer or two.’ – John

The rise of County Lines is thus connected with the enduring nature of addiction to heroin within certain areas and a context of high levels of unemployment fueling the misery of hopelessness. Practitioner John argues that with the rise of the IDM in Scotland, initially a few ‘big players’ fought for control of this market, often via acquiring new physical turf from which to distribute drugs. Yet globalization, access to and advancement of commodities such as technology and the internet permitted subsequent growth and diversification of the global drugs trade, resulting in a more diversified trade with more dealers than the few “bog players” can keep out. As John points out, the UK drug market has continued to grow, to the extent that it has become impossible for a single drug dealer or any one SOCG to truly monopolize or ‘govern’ the IDM (McLean et al., 2018). Paul’s analysis of a crowded market concludes that this has resulted in smaller dealers commuting or relocating elsewhere, pursuing ‘new pastures’, which are less saturated and have lower intensity trading and competition. SOCG leader Sophie’s assessment is that:

‘[Glasgow area X] is [dangerous]. It’s just one of them risks wi’ doing this type of shit [in Glasgow area X]. I moved here [to rural village X] to get away from it all [and avoid] hassle. It is shite [in the village] ... [but at] least here there is only really myself

and a few others [to compete with] ... [a male from] Glasgow... but [I] keep my distance.’ – Sophie

Keeping her distance reduces her likelihood of victimization: in line with the predictions of opportunity theory Sophie no longer (“I keep my distance”) presents herself as an opportunity for potential offenders (McDonald, 2018). Drug dealers like Sophie provide evidence of a change in supply methods in the rural domain. Sophie appears ready to risk her life for the gains that come from a longer-term ‘holidaying’ in a rural area. Traditionally the more powerful dealers operated from major urban hubs that afforded them access to extensive criminal networks. These dealers used their social and symbolic capital and established supply networks to dominate and undercut indigenous rural dealers. Paul highlights personal gain as his incentive to change his ‘workplace’. John highlights a sense of over-crowding suggestive of a social ecology where residents are familiar with others on their streets. Sophie foregrounds her fear of violent assault as promoting her choice of new residence.

### **Control through disaggregation of dealing**

County Lines in England and Scotland differentially function in several ways. In major English drug distribution hubs, such as London, OCGs operating from within the city develop a dual distribution strategy. They deal drugs in the city boundaries on established turf and routes whilst also recruiting ‘worker’ drug mules who navigate rural communities, towns, and villages. This class of County Line recruit is a loose associate or non-gang affiliated individual. In this way, OCGs extend the hegemony of existing spheres of influence and attendant lines of supply. An English participant (Markus) points out, aligned with mass media accounts of County Line mules, that:

‘We don’t go nowhere. Young [ones] be taking them risks. Shit, why go when [we] got others [to go] running [for us].’ – Markus

This statement indicates that that ‘we’ (his OCG) is considered by Markus as an entity independent of ‘recruits’ who travel to other locations beyond the city (go ‘running’) to distribute drugs on Markus’s gang’s behalf. These “young ones” are among the most exploited and vulnerable in this nexus of illegality. Media sources describe recruits as young as 8 years old who are runaways from home or care homes, who are impressionable to the lure of ‘quick money’ and have unmet attachment, support and social ‘distinction’ needs. Indigenous SOCGs operate through two main forms: Sophie is one of the few who actively relocate to rural environs in order to establish new operational bases. Sophie maintained her connections to Glasgow, where her own supply lines were entwined with gang muscle. The other strategically distinctive Scottish dimension was that rural dealers would initiate and establish lines with Glasgow and West coast based SOCGs, in order give them a steady drug supply and violence capital for hire. However, such rural dealers had pre-existing ties to Glasgow criminals, either having lived there as children before their parents relocated to the country or through accessing parentally established networks formed whilst in Glasgow prior to the initiation of the dealer relationship. Such networks are regularly founded in

kinship /extended families like the composition of Italian mafia groupings; Greg's account of older familial social capital reverberates this:

'My auld man (dad) was from [Glasgow area A]. I still have loads of family there. See them quite a bit. We would stay at my aunts, and with my big cousins [A] and that lot, down in [Glasgow area A] ... that's how my [dad] got a reputation when he came here. I've grew up here... My cousins [A, B, and C] come out and stay with me often eh. Do some business [together]. Basically, I kind of work wi' them, no so much for them. They back me.' - Greg

Following Spicer et al. (2019) Greg's situation represents a type of "Quasi-cuckooing" as there is a willingness and consent involved in the acceptance of these visiting family ties. Although raised in a small Norther Scottish town, Greg's activity was protected by the shadow cast by his father's fearsome reputation. He retained and entered *business* via strong kinship ties within Glasgow, ensuring a steady supply of drugs and muscle. County lines in Scotland are arguably more intimate in terms of blood relations than elsewhere. Steven, for example, moved to a small town in North-East Scotland as a child from the West coast and exploited existing Glasgow based kinship and friendship relationships, effectively establishing an outpost for the urban SOCG, whose criminal resources protected the Northern turf. Steven 'recruited' homes of vulnerable individuals on behalf of SOCGs, thus facilitating clandestine dealing and resultant income flow re-circulating back down the supply chain. Spicer et al. (2019) describe the invasion of the homes of individuals as "parasitic nest invading" it being the dominant type of cuckooing of the property of vulnerable persons. Steven explains:

'Am no out eh... doing any fucking diddy work. The [SOCG Glasgow branch] just send me what I need. Just text. Boom eh, it's here ken. Got a few [youths], do the [runs] about the town. I am more like a director. The [youths] take [stuff] to the houses, get the pickups in exchange. Bring back to me. Whack, goes back down the line.' – Steven

Steven, who perceives himself as being above the grunt ("diddy") work of local drug mules, provides an extended 'branch' for the Glasgow based SOCG, creating a well-established County Line. This business model resonates with core-periphery staffing structures. Steven strategically manages distribution activities, local mid-adolescent youths 'drop [stuff]' to designated houses occupied by vulnerable individuals (often users or young renters of social welfare funded homes), which others visit to purchase drugs. These drug-mule youths collect money and send it to associates of Steven who, presenting publicly as legitimate business owners, 'clean' the criminal money. Operating through a dispersed social structure is advantageous in that SOCGs can retain greater control over drug supply lines, thus securing greater profit-flow back to the established centre. Disaggregation also interferes with a new power base developing as it separates individuals from other individuals or groups, thus aiding maintenance of vulnerability. Additionally, core SOCG members evade turf wars that would increase the risk of police attention; instead, they engage in strategically positive proxy warfare whereby recruits and vulnerable local recruits (youths and/or indebted drug addicts) are exploited as the SOCGs proxy

combatants. Scotland, in recent years, has seen growth of OCGs from England bypassing Glasgow and the West Coast and extending their drug lines to rural sites such as Peterhead and Fraserburgh. These Northern towns have a vibrant and often globally mobile workforce; the fishing and oil industries pay high wages to a young labor force. Such features are attractive to drug dealers seeking new customers; nevertheless, significant levels of unemployment in this region of Scotland exist, introducing vulnerability into the lives of young people affected who are also encountering an increasingly aggressive welfare accountability regime.

### **Ecologies of coercive exploitation**

The essence of exploitation is the actual or potential abuse of power to take advantage of another through compulsion, to deny free choice to those in a weaker position (Virgo, 2015: 255-56). Exploitation is notable amongst youths recruited as runners or enforcers and users whose homes are occupied; if they are indebted to dealers they are 'sent out to work' (for example to commit theft, run errands, take out finance, store illegal goods and even support offenders on the run). Steven says:

'The boys do what they like, sometimes you never know they might need to take care of someone. Maybe that someone might not like paying those he has to pay eh. I always have the boys' backs, no fucking about. [The Glasgow branch] have mine.' – Steven

Social capital networks are pragmatic; Steven's euphemism "taking care of someone", describes the deployment of violence and the coercion of reluctant customers who are unwilling to pay their debts. Steven indicates that support from individuals from a well-established Glasgow based SOCG gives him leverage over locally established dealers who may act in isolation. Steven, implicitly, indicates that the youths who work for him may at times be required to carry out acts of retribution against debtors. This 'code of the street' consists of a *mélange* of vulnerability and calculated exploitation. Martin shared his analysis that youths are particularly vulnerable to manipulative exploitation aimed at gathering intelligence:

'The [youths] are just impressionable [teenagers]. They want to impress, act hard and all. I wouldn't take advantage, but I know a lot of folk that use them to like scope out whatever, y'know, get intelligence on maybe how someone moves. Nobody thinks anything about the [boy] on the bike.... Another geezer uses the [youths] to hold onto his [commodities]. Fuck knows if he even pays them. Probably not.' – Martin

Females, often from care homes or other at-risk groups, typically have their vulnerability exploited sexually for financial reward. Sexual exploitation of unaccompanied migrant children is associated with the unsafe nature of their destinations, origins and a daily exposure to adverse living conditions (Digidiki et al., 2018). Paralleling care experienced children, they too are stigmatized. The comparative social isolation of our sample may augment victimization. Ricky, discussing the storage of illegal goods on behalf of his criminal

gang highlights how they contract agreements through abusive personal relationships that draw others into criminal activity.

‘Shaunie, he is [in a sexual relationship with] this burd. She is pure fucked up. Daft [young] lassie mate. He [has infrequent relationship with her to] keep her sweet. She don’t say nothing... Fuck the police ever busted her housemate, she would be doing a stretch and a half.... ammo, vests, Ching (cut cocaine), fucking lot, you name it, a fucking [mixing agents] .... no, man, no way, no. Shaunie wouldn’t take the kid. No right, I’ve said that... He has a [long-term partner]. She ain’t going to take random kids in<sup>3</sup>.’ - Ricky

Spicer et al.’s (2019) third typology of cuckooing called “coupling” is suggested by Shaunie’s behavior. The coupling cuckooing represents situations where male dealers enter sexual relationships with female residents. This variant of cuckooing challenges the idea it is an invasion. Instead Spicer et al. (2019) propose we see it as like a sexual grooming process which in this case may benefit the female victim to fund her addiction and avoid other criminality. Single female households are among the largest welfare recipients. Young working-class females are exploited through intimate heterosexual relationships to hide illegal contraband. Sometimes these women receive income for allowing their homes to be used for a criminal purpose. The “lassie” (“this burd”) to whom Ricky refers was young and lacked family support. Sophie argued:

‘Basically [SOCG member male A or male B] usually go scope the place first and if it is cool then they start dealing.... like in the town centre, just [approach] [drug]users. You can tell them a mile away... [then] get the users to start selling for you... They do anything for a hit. [Male A] is bold. He asks them to let him stash gear in their house and sell from there... [he] collects every other day.... The [user] get[s] an allowance from what we put there (in drugs) so don’t need to [leave to purchase elsewhere]. They take what they want, but we don’t allow them to have parties with everyone.... [If they run up bills, miss payments, etc.] [I] give a warning. [Male A] might tax them, like interest. Fuck, even puts the girls out to work if it’s a good bit .... [users frequently] ask for tick, or run up big bills, then no pay or answer [phone]calls. This wee lassie [X] was the pure worst.’ – Sophie

This ecology of abuse relies upon concealment and mutual dependency. Gossip about others, ‘getting busted’ and ‘acting sketchy’ influence the behavior of dealers, via interactional social processes lying in the background of these extracts (Dickenson and Wright 2015). Homes are institutions for this social business with drug dependent occupiers exploited as market operatives. Criminal signaling in the form of behavioral features observed in the street permits a relatively risk-free encounter to proceed. However, social life is strategically circumscribed, as once the home is commandeered for dealing and drug storage the ebb and flow of social life is terminated. This ecological design isolates and removes opportunity for operatives gaining legitimate community support should they have second thoughts. SOCGs exercising control over operatives are aware that if legal recourse

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<sup>3</sup> Note Ricky later identified the child as Shaunie’s.

was sought, they could be arrested for offences committed whilst connected with drug dealing. Systems of entrapment, which ironically exploit criminal law, enable SOCGs to persist in their criminal enterprise in the knowledge of being paradoxically protected by law. Rather than theorize the places of drug dealing in hinterlands such as Peterhead in terms of a *code of the street*, a less confrontational “code of the suburb” seems more apposite to smaller communities where deviants are more likely to be shamed and lose the respect of others who know them (Jacques and Wright, 2012). County Lines is no less a violent context than the classic representation of code of the street in the US. The National Crime Agency (2017) corroborate this conclusion, highlighting how violent intimidation is endemic to County Lines.

## CONCLUSION

The NCA (2017) claims to have identified 720 lines operating over England and Wales, most of which originate in the alleged export hub of London, but it is important to be cautious before accepting such a quantification: official numbers assume secure knowledge that London is in fact the “export hub” and also that the 720 Lines are more or less homogenous, which is unlikely in terms of their origins, functioning and trajectories. As Scotland’s largest city Glasgow seems to play a similar role as export hub to London, bearing in mind the caveats just given, in terms of Lines running throughout Scotland. The NCA (2017) found that 42% of Lines are using children from the age of 12, mainly boys, as others note (Kommenda, 2019). Hudek (2018: 4) describes County Lines as “extremely efficient national networks” where involvement exposes children to high risk and unsafe environments, arguing “that [they] disregard and exploit boundaries” that exist within support services or restrictions connected with police force area. However, circumspection is required since to calibrate claims about the efficiency of County Lines networks would require comparative data about human and financial capital, - that knowledge is likely to be resistant to detection and measurement. In most Lines the children are white and are often deployed through the train network. The choice of their destination is based on the extent of demographic fit with their others residing in that area. Operational stealth is achieved through the anonymizing nature this disguise offers from the attention of the authorities and curious residents. Once operational, the Lines open extensive coming and going of new individuals, helping normalize the appearance of new faces in an area which may not always be challenging in areas of existing social disorganization and strain. Our article contributes to knowledge of County Lines at several levels. County Lines require complex transportation logistics and ‘runs’ are varied in order to evade covert police surveillance. Market overcrowding within export hubs such as Glasgow is one of the reasons for the growth in County Lines. It is emblematic of a new market and supply system, with children and young people deployed by gangs to distribute the drugs along the lines and then network with those in this market in the local towns. Although families and sexually exploitative relationships were found to be involved in the Lines, it is unlikely that they would, by themselves, have the capacity to support the existing quantity of Scottish Lines. Further investigation would be required to find networking that may also occur within prisons, young offenders’ institutions and care homes for children and young people. Similarities exist between youths in our sample and those in other studies whose transition

from the security of institutional arrangements, such as care, into employment was a period of intense vulnerability, especially where social difference heightens their risk of exploitation (Eisenberg et al., 2016). Berzin (2010) describes how poor transition outcomes, in the US, are associated with prior and existing educational and social problems. Berzin (2010) coins the term “everyday manhood” to designate a post-adolescent phase preceding adulthood; the “everyday” characterizes feelings of alienation, instability, self-focus and identity development. The attraction of monetary gain and ‘celebrity’ status through purchasing power is illuminated by Berzin’s (2010) finding that youths struggle to gain economic self-sufficiency. The development of County Lines is associated with changes in family systems and care support. Criminal courts have difficulty accepting testimonies of youths whose prior life histories involve conflict with authority, so the existence of a large pool of vulnerable children and young people provide SOCGs running County Lines with the opportunity to thrive.

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