



SCHOOL'S OUT

Thousands of urban kids are being exploited by “county lines” gangs — sent to deal drugs in towns and villages. With schools closed, fears are growing that many more will be sucked in. *Sharon Hendry* gets a chilling first-hand insight into their brutal world

Michael elucidates the complexities of his lucrative business model with a poise and eloquence far beyond his 15 years. If the roll of the birth dice had landed more favourably, he would surely be at a top public school destined for Oxbridge and an MBA.

As it is, he is sitting in a tatty north London cafe lamenting the fact he has attended four schools, including two pupil referral units, and is now permanently excluded, drifting in and out of a prolific drugs operation known as “county lines”. The cell he’s been involved with, he says, handles about £1 million a year.

“County lines can tempt anyone. When you see the money that’s when it changes,” he says. “It’s not a certain type of person; anyone can get persuaded by the people they know and grow up with. It could be a childhood friend telling me how much ‘P’ [money] I could be making. They think it’s all easy, like: ‘Let me get the package and drop it off.’ But you have to make lots of decisions. You have to stick up for yourself.”

I made contact with Michael through a trusted source and he agreed to provide a rare insight into the dark and dangerous underworld of county lines, also known as “going country” or “OT” (out there). It involves urban drug gangs sending children and other vulnerable “mules” to smaller towns and villages. The gangs use violence to take over the local drug market and the mules become the supply line. Heroin, cocaine and crack are the most common drugs being run.

Police fear that the Covid-19 pandemic won’t stop county lines operations, but will instead drive them towards a more localised, door-to-door delivery model triggering a brutal fight for business and territory.

Jackie Sebire, assistant chief constable of Bedfordshire police and the National Police Chiefs Council lead for serious violence, warns that “a storm is coming” because of the coronavirus: “County lines’ success lies in its adaptability. It’s always responding to market conditions, and the current pandemic will not defeat it. The business model is ruthless and agile. The most important thing is we prepare for this.”

Seasoned county lines operators typically establish territory by taking over the property of a vulnerable adult (usually a drug user or someone with special needs) in a process called “cuckooing”. Dealers then promote special offers and take orders from customers on mobile phone “deal lines”. Two-for-one deals and free samples in exchange for the contact details of new clientele can swiftly spread their net wider.

Sebire predicts the lockdown may spur more users to buy drugs from street dealers



BRICK BY BRICK ‘Michael’, 15, is involved with a cell that handles £1m a year, he claims

as their usual supplies — such as prescription methadone — are disrupted. And that will have a knock-on effect among the county lines gangs, potentially sparking a violent war for more localised territory. “We will see more and more exploitation as we come out of the back end of this pandemic,” she says.

More than 10,000 UK children, aged 11-17, are estimated to be involved in county lines operations. With an individual county line commanding in excess of £800,000

“Only the ones with heart that can fight back will make it. You can go to hospital with fractures, a smashed head, a broken nose”

profit a year, the stakes are high and foot soldiers have long been controlled with violence and weapons.

Michael explains this matter-of-factly: “It immediately changes you. You are going to be put in situations where you freeze or fight. You are young. You are a worker. The gang leaders will punch and slap you, take the Ps. You have to stand up for yourself. You have to fight. Most people can’t make that adjustment. Only the ones with heart that can fight back will make it. You can go to hospital with fractures, a smashed head, a broken nose.

“In the end it’s all worth it because you start seeing proper money, thousands per week. Some people stash it in a friend’s house; some people are just too scared, so they just spend it. Who doesn’t want to be worshipped? Who doesn’t want that for themselves? We want to be like that someone in a nice suit with a nice tie, nice shoes. You need respect.”

Whatever formula is driving recruitment, it is working. National Crime Agency analysis estimates there are currently over 2,000 individual deal line telephone numbers in the UK. They are mainly based in areas covered by the Metropolitan police service, West Midlands and Merseyside; but all 43 force areas in England and Wales are now reporting county lines.

Michael describes the slow-burn grooming process that ensnares children: “They won’t straight away send you somewhere. They will slowly, slowly show you. They will show you the food [drugs] and the strip [territory] and which ones are dedicated [operated by certain dealers]. They will make you feel as if you are ‘my guy’ then when trust starts to build, they will send you somewhere like Ipswich with £50k worth of drugs.

“They give you the bag and they tell you: ‘If you see police, don’t make eye contact, don’t act paranoid, be respectful.’ The first couple of times they give you the train fare while trust is being built. There will be someone there when you reach the destination and you call them. That’s when how ‘on it’ you are comes to the test. The person at the other end doesn’t politely say: ‘Let’s do business.’ Instead, it’s: ‘Yo! Come here!’ And they drag you into the back of a vehicle. You will be a bit scared. You don’t know where you are driving to. You don’t know where it is but it will be a bando [crack house]. You get told: ‘Wait there!’ Then they take the bag and you might wait two, three, four hours.

“You don’t ask what they do. They go and get the money. You’re just a little kid. You wait for them to come back with the money. They might show you knives and say: ‘Shall I cut you up?’ Some people start crying, but that’s one of the worst things to do. They will make you wait even longer if you start to cry.

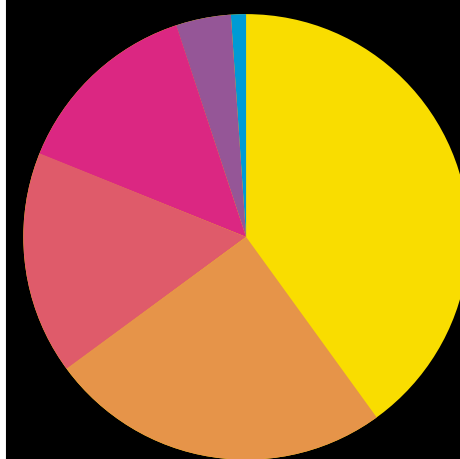
“Then it’s back in the back of the van and a drop-off at the station with money in your backpack. You’re not supposed to open the bag, and if they find out you’ve looked inside and stolen money or drugs they will do a lot of stuff to you. They will kidnap you, mask you up and put you in the back of a van and threaten to put you 5ft under. It’s like a hunt-or-be-hunted situation. You can run but then you will be seen as a ‘pussy wet’ and you won’t get respect. You have to fight to show you are a big man.

“We mainly protect ourselves with knives but you could get hold of a gun. You can get a gun for intimidation purposes or with a magazine of 12 bullets for £300-£600.”

In one case youngsters from north London were dumped in the flat of a 56-year-old addict in Bodmin, Cornwall, which they used to sell heroin and crack cocaine delivered into the county in hired cars. In September 2019 seven gang members were convicted of running a

DRUGS ON THE MOVE

This chart shows the modes of transport used in county lines. Exploited children are often too young to drive, so rail is dominant



■ Train
■ Bus/coach
■ Private car
■ Hire car
■ Pool car
■ Taxi

county lines operation that exploited vulnerable young people as mules and sold class A drugs to almost 100 users in Cornish towns. One of the exploited boys, who was 16, told police he had incurred a drug debt of £55 with the gang and was told he could pay it off by dealing. He presumed he would be put to work near his home in north London but he ended up 250 miles away in Bodmin, far from family, friends and familiar surroundings. The gang was so violent that when police raided addresses in London and Cornwall, one gang member threatened officers with a machete before

91%

The proportion of county lines operatives that are boys. However, girls’ involvement may be underreported

being overpowered and arrested.

Boys currently represent 91% of recorded county lines operatives but police believe that girls may be underrepresented as offenders and victims of exploitation. Michael says: “Girls want to be with a county liner person because they think he’s protected. They have these ideas that it’s going to be happily ever after, and they will carry out work because their man will say: ‘If you love me you will do it for me’ but girls end up getting hurt and arrested.”

The office of the Children’s Commissioner for England estimates that as many as 27,000 young people have been

sucked into gang activity in Britain in recent years. Anne Longfield, the commissioner, worries the number will rise as the pandemic worsens. “If the county lines business model becomes more localised, my fear is that hundreds of children will be fighting it out for prominence. The group of ruthless people who control them will not go away,” she says.

“I was hugely relieved that the government took the decision to keep schools open [for vulnerable children] but we need children to be there. Early reports suggest that 80% plus of vulnerable children are not taking up their places. They are out of sight and without that safe place and structure. For these children, the pandemic triggers a toxic cocktail of security risks. Alongside county lines concerns, we know that there are 830,000 children living in homes where there is domestic violence.”

Longfield wants the government to expand the army of volunteers helping the NHS to social care, and redeploy football coaches, scout leaders, nursery staff and dinner ladies, who have already been vetted to work with children, to check on those young people who are most at risk.

Gerry Robinson is all too aware of the tightrope some of her pupils are now walking without the sanctuary of their normal school routine. As the headteacher and safeguarding lead at Woodside High School in Haringey, north London, she knows that many of her 1,200 students, aged 11-16, live in poverty and are now more susceptible to county lines grooming.

She says: “I’m still in school and we have approximately 25 students in each day — they are either the children of key workers or very vulnerable. The school closures are a huge worry for me. I understand why they have to happen, but I can’t even articulate how fearful I am for our children.

“In the last week I have had reports of three children missing from home — because there is no school check-in — and also we’ve had several reports of domestic violence. Housing issues and poverty are being felt more acutely and we have had to set up our own food bank in school. We have a boy in year 11 at the moment who is involved in county lines. On reflection, there were signs in year 8 but it was so hard to distinguish them from all the other potential factors. Like so many, he is a child living in poverty; his mother has mental health problems; his dad is involved in gang violence and we just thought he was struggling to cope.

“We are becoming much more adept at seeing the signs. People talk about indicators like having two phones, but it’s changes in behaviour that are more obvious — children becoming more tired and falling asleep in lessons; being more aggressive; more hungry. Children going missing is of course another obvious indicator. They come home after four days and ➤➤➤

they are dirty and hungry. We've even had students coming in with wounds.

"We need recognition of what is really happening in relation to county lines. We need to be able to transfer children to mental-health services without an 18-month waiting list; we need to be able to meet the needs of kids living in poverty; we need to be able to provide a free breakfast for every child and help them with housing."

A second and relative latecomer to county lines is Tyrone. His story offers a rare glimpse of hope in an otherwise bleak narrative. He joined at 16 and quickly progressed to become part of a four-man team selling drugs in London. But now at 21, he is training at a leading accountancy firm, thanks to the support of a mentoring charity.

"Youths just need opportunities. No one comes out of the womb wanting to sell drugs. All the behaviour is learned," he says. "We just need people to listen and show us love. Gangs offer brotherhood and friendship, but it's all built on quicksand because as soon as something goes wrong, it's every man for himself.

"At first, I was a look-out, driving up and down central London earning £50-£60 per night. Then, I would sit in the passenger seat holding the product [in small plastic bags] in my mouth waiting for feens [crack users] to approach the car. That increased my salary to up to £300 per day.

"Adrenalin is a huge factor. You literally feel you own the patch but the risk of being caught is always present. The driver must learn to manoeuvre the car in a way to give you enough time to swallow the drugs if the police approach.

"I had no knowledge of the importers, but cells running multiple county lines are earning around £100k per day. But the reality is that selling hard drugs is selling death. People overdose all the time and a heroin user who is sick and has no money will pull out a needle or a knife on a 14-year-old kid.

"I feel so lucky to have this second chance but it's not easy to adjust to a world where respect is often gained through things like class and education as opposed to violence."

That mindset is familiar to Eamon McCrory, professor of developmental neuroscience and psychopathology at University College London, whose research focuses on early adversity, the brain and mental-health problems in childhood. He says: "A degree of importance within a hierarchy becomes a huge draw for these young people because that's what they have failed to experience as a child. A very simple, direct way to experience a sense of value and purpose is to attain status with money and concrete symbols of wealth. This becomes a much easier path than trying to gain a sense of value through relationships that increasingly only seem fraught and challenging, with no road map to follow."



SECOND CHANCE 'Tyrone', 21, has left drug dealing and is training at an accountancy firm

Former prison worker-turned-youth leader Ray Lewis has seen the damage caused by county lines at first hand: he has been taking responsibility for county lines children at his Eastside Young Leaders academy for over 10 years and witnessed a cycle where the victim turns perpetrator.

"I've met the people who send the children out. They have a developed instinct for spotting the vulnerable even though they would not always be obvious to you or me. Something inside you dies a long time before you begin to recruit children to sell your drugs. If you allow the luxury of sentiment to creep into your thinking, you will be eaten alive. The leaders enter the

1,421

The number of cases of modern slavery involving children in 2018, up from 676 in 2017, according to the NCA

'road' [street] in defence mode. They can't afford compassion."

Is there a solution, some way out of the mess? The chief constable of Devon and Cornwall, Shaun Sawyer, believes we need to adopt a new attitude towards the children involved in county lines operations. Sawyer, who is national police lead for modern slavery and human trafficking, says: "We used to associate young girls involved in sexual exploitation cases with poor life choices. Thankfully, we do not do that any more and recognise that as children they were exploited. In the case of county lines, there is a danger that as a society, we make the same mistake again, particularly where boys are concerned.

"My job is to catch and convict villains, but I do not see children as villains. In county lines, we need to see the child. The rest is just the medium through which they are exploited."

New laws are some help, says Tim Champion, silver lead for the National County Lines Coordination Centre. County lines drug running, he says, "is a socio-economic challenge that can't be solved by policing alone. You can't arrest your way out of it. Hence the change with the use of the Modern Slavery Act."

He is referring to Section 45 of the 2017 legislation, which provides a statutory defence for victims of modern slavery who were compelled to carry out certain criminal offences as a result of exploitation, such as being forced to sell drugs.

"Modern slavery prosecution works because it puts the onus back on the organisers. [County lines drug] dealers are seen as child traffickers and that starts impacting on them so they start asking the kids how old they are. And you don't necessarily need the kids to give evidence and you are protecting them from themselves," says Champion.

The number of British children identified as potential victims of modern slavery has more than doubled in a year. Cases of modern slavery involving UK minors surged from 676 in 2017 to 1,421 in 2018, two-thirds of which were linked to labour exploitation, National Crime Agency data revealed. The figure has been rising every year, according to the National Referral Mechanism — the framework used to identify victims of modern slavery in the UK. Responding to coronavirus, the Home Office announced that potential victims of modern slavery are to be allowed to stay in government-funded safe houses for the next three months.

So what hope does Michael have for the future? Before Covid-19, he was on a path of rehabilitation with the help of intensive youth mentoring, but he admits that county lines is not easy to leave behind. "You can't just stop. It's a long process. If you have respect, you just lower the amount you do. You just go back to sorting the food [drugs] in your area. Even if you do get out, there will always be people after you for 'violating' so they get people to jump you and they will hunt your family. Someone I know got killed and it made me think: "That could be me."

"Now, I'm being taught leadership qualities and it makes me think about how to be a good person. It opens up opportunities, shows me my potential. I'm not making the thousands I used to, but I'm not in prison either and I'm learning that I can be a good working man and have a nice family. I'm on my way out — it's a risk worth taking." ■

Michael and Tyrone are pseudonyms. To support efforts to rehabilitate young people involved in county lines, donate to the Eastside Young Leaders Academy, eyla.org.uk