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# 'County lines': racism, safeguarding and statecraft in Britain

INSA KOCH, PATRICK WILLIAMS and LAUREN WROE

*Abstract:* Government policies relating to dealers in 'county lines' drugs trafficking cases have been welcomed as a departure from punitive approaches to drugs and 'gang' policing, in that those on the bottom rung of the drugs economy of heroin and crack cocaine are no longer treated as criminals but as potential victims and 'modern slaves' in need of protection. However, our research suggests not so much a radical break with previous modes of policing as that the term 'county lines' emerged as a logical extension of the government's racist and classist language surrounding 'gangs', knife crime and youth violence. Policies implemented in the name of safeguarding the vulnerable also act as a gateway for criminalisation not just under drugs laws but also modern slavery legislation. The government's discovery of, and responses to, 'county lines' hinge on a moral

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crisis in the making, which ultimately deepens the state's pre-emptive and violent criminalisation of the 'Black criminal other' at a time of deep political crisis.

*Keywords:* Black youth, county lines, criminalisation, drugs, gangs, modern slavery legislation, policing, safeguarding, youth violence strategy

*In the context of inequality and precarity, austerity without end, and when the state has nothing to offer except the impossible promise of security, the figures of the 'gangster', the 'immigrant' and the 'terrorist' work their perverse magic, distorting democratic possibilities and licensing the worst kinds of authoritarianism.*

– G. Bhattacharyya, et al.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the last decade we have witnessed the emergence of 'county lines'<sup>2</sup> in government policy, the mass media, and in the professional and public psyche – and with it, a proliferation of stories of both victimised children and their alleged perpetrators. During this period, the authors of this article have conducted ethnographic, embedded and activist research with policy-makers, professionals, families and young people impacted by 'county lines' and by the multi-agency response. As we watched the issue unfold, garnering significant public attention and huge sums of government money, we began to track from where and why this issue emerged, and what it meant to protect children and in some cases adults whose so-called exploitation defines 'county lines'. This article brings together findings from three significant bodies of work that have sought to make sense of 'county lines': activist- and advocacy-based research with families impacted by 'gangs' policing; embedded research with child safeguarding agencies; and extensive ethnography in UK communities from which 'county lines' victims and perpetrators are discovered as well as the institutional sites through which they travel.

It was through the emerging parallels in our respective research that we began to investigate a set of questions at the heart of this paper: how does the emerging language of 'county lines', and the policies surrounding it, sit with what we know about racialised policing with respect to drugs and 'gang' enforcement? How do the unexplored connections between the two help explain some of the ostensible failures on the part of the government to safeguard those who, on the government's own terms, have now been identified as worthy of safeguarding and care? And finally, to ask a more critical question, what can we learn through an analysis of 'county lines' about modes of statecraft and racist state power in contemporary austerity Britain? Much of the policy language and government discourse has emphasised a 'good news story' – presenting a tale according to which the discovery of victimhood amongst 'county lines' drug dealers constitutes a welcome departure from received modes of law enforcement. This mirrors the academic engagement with the debate which has tended to celebrate the rise of tropes surrounding 'safeguarding' and 'vulnerability' as an important break from

more exclusionary modes of governance that have been attributed to the so-called 'punitive turn'.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, our insights challenge this perspective. Drawing on each body of our research and triangulating our key findings, we begin to tell a different story, one which brings into focus the problematic ways in which the impetus to safeguard and care co-exists alongside, reinforces and silences the state's drive to punish and to exclude. Far from seeing these two dynamics as contradictions that need resolving, we argue that the government's construction of a 'county lines crisis' further entrenches, legitimises and perpetuates a deeply racialised and classed criminal justice system in the name of saving the vulnerable and the poor. Ultimately, the government's discovery of, and its responses to, 'county lines' hinge on a moral crisis in the making, which ultimately deepens the state's preemptive and violent criminalisation of the 'Black criminal other' at a time of deep political crisis.

In developing these arguments, this piece makes three contributions. The first is genealogical. We trace the emergence of the term 'county lines' on the policy landscape in a way that has not been done before, thus demonstrating the ways in which it has inextricably been tied with, and echoes, the racist and classist language of 'gangs' / youth violence / knife crime and the authoritarian forms of law enforcement and practices that have been authorised in its wake. In so doing, we question the narrative of 'newness' that has surrounded 'county lines' by critically investigating the discursive context in which it became possible to think. Our second contribution is empirical. Recent work from within policy and academia has called for the need to produce more evidence-led research on British victims of modern slavery, particularly with respect to criminal exploitation and county lines.<sup>4</sup> However, this call has tended to be defined by a complete disregard for the ways in which entrenched racial and classed inequalities are at the heart of the criminal justice system's response to those who are now potentially discovered as in need of 'saving'. This article begins to fill this gap. Its final contribution is more theoretical: we argue – drawing on the tradition of Stuart Hall and his colleagues, and contemporary critical scholars<sup>5</sup> – for the need to insert critical social theory perspectives into current debates on 'county lines'.

### **From individual research to collaborative inquiry: a decolonial agenda**

While it might be tempting to present this research project as the outcome of an *a priori* defined set of questions and empirical projects, that would be misleading: instead, our insights derive from a triangulation of three separate research projects conducted across the four disciplines of social work, sociology, anthropology and law, in the course of which we realised the need to speak to each other. This article draws on three empirical bodies of work carried out by the respective authors over the last decade. These separate bodies of work followed the introduction, and ramping up, of the UK government's anti-gangs strategy launched in 2011<sup>6</sup> and the morphing of these policies into the more recent serious youth violence strategy that specifically foregrounds the phenomenon of 'county lines'.<sup>7</sup>

All the work draws on a combination of policy and genealogical analysis and ethnographic methods to get alongside the professionals enacting, and individuals and communities subject to, these policy agendas – whilst critically examining the historical and political contexts in which these ‘criminal’ and/or ‘safeguarding’ issues have emerged.

Between 2018 and 2023, Lauren Wroe carried out policy analysis of the emerging phenomenon of ‘county lines’ (2018–2021) and conducted embedded research in a range of local authorities (2019 to date) to understand multi-agency safeguarding responses to child exploitation, including ‘county lines’. Through this work, Wroe encountered safeguarding partnerships that sought to identify and safeguard young people who were exploited to sell drugs via ‘county lines’. These projects analysed data from safeguarding referrals and scoured police intelligence databases, to identify individuals linked to ‘county lines’. Personal data (including names/addresses/gang affiliation/locations) were stored on cohort lists and processed to local police databases.<sup>8</sup> In some cases, the number of individuals (including adults) profiled through this data analysis exceeded the number of young people referred for support seven times over. Both document analyses and safeguarding statistics indicated that the individuals profiled as ‘county lines’-affected were disproportionately Black and male.<sup>9</sup> This work was happening against the backdrop of a report published by Amnesty in 2018 that detailed the disproportionate number of young Black men (78 per cent of those included) who were being profiled by the Metropolitan Police on their ‘Violent Gangs Matrix’ (VGM), many of whom (35 per cent) had never committed a serious offence<sup>10</sup> and 65 per cent considered low risk.<sup>11</sup> It was also at this time that the Information Commissioner’s Office issued an Enforcement Notice to the Metropolitan Police regarding breaches of its data protection duties, disproportionate targeting of Black and ethnic minority people, and a lack of distinction between those deemed to be victims of gangs and those deemed to be offenders.

The similarities between ‘county lines’ cohort lists, in the name of safeguarding vulnerable young people, and the VGM were not only troubling to Wroe. At around the same time, Patrick Williams and colleagues<sup>12</sup> had been conducting extensive mixed methods research to understand the profiling of Black youth on ‘gang’ databases in other UK cities, revealing in particular how this profiling facilitated processes of criminalisation and enacted a raft of police and criminal justice interventions that had significant harmful and debilitating consequences for Black young people.<sup>13</sup> The research showed that Black young people made up 72 per cent and 81 per cent of ‘gangs’ cohorts in London and Manchester respectively, despite representing just 27 per cent and 6 per cent of those involved in ‘serious violence’. Beyond this, to be profiled as a ‘gang’ nominal meant that these young people were likely to face problems when accessing housing, or education, or with their own young families;<sup>14</sup> more likely to be stopped and searched by the police, to be convicted of ‘joint enterprise’ offences,<sup>15</sup> and to receive longer sentences.<sup>16</sup> The findings from Williams’ research resonated with Wroe’s concern about the emerging discourse and multi-agency practice surrounding ‘county

lines'.<sup>17</sup> For Wroe it seemed that being profiled by multi-agency safeguarding partners as being 'county lines'-affiliated could have the same troubling consequences for the majority of Black boys and young men who were profiled in this way.

Indeed, Wroe's impression that more was at stake was confirmed when Wroe and Williams began a conversation with Insa Koch. Koch has been conducting long-term ethnographic and activist-driven research in Britain's disenfranchised urban housing estates since 2009. In 2018 Koch went back to a long-term field site to spend time with the families she had been working with for over a decade.<sup>18</sup> There, she saw the impact of 'county lines' policing and the emerging use of modern slavery legislation. The developments were coming together in uncanny ways, producing sometimes contradictory, at other times outright punitive, results as policies implemented in the name of 'safeguarding' also ended up criminalising the same cohort of people, sometimes even the same individual. Here the same young men – many of whom were Black or otherwise minoritised as non-white – who were considered to be 'gang' members or 'at risk' of being in a 'gang' were now also treated as being potential victims or perpetrators of 'county lines'. Not only that, but as Koch moved from the community to court-based ethnography, more contradictions came to light. The same young person who was identified as a 'slave' and as 'criminally exploited' by one set of authorities could face charges for drugs or, more seriously, for human trafficking and, as was the case in one case Koch followed, joint enterprise murder.

It bears stating up front that, though requested, the government has not made any statistical data available regarding the ethnic and racial breakdown of those identified as involved in 'county lines', or of drugs and human trafficking prosecutions brought against them. This is despite data from multi-agency safeguarding partnerships indicating a significant over-representation of Black young people in county lines cohorts at a rate of six times more than other ethnicities.<sup>19</sup> This disproportionality, particularly of boys and young men, was noted as a 'serious concern' by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel.<sup>20</sup> Our respective research has also shown us that the policies operate in both racialising and racist ways, entrenching deep-seated inequalities in and beyond the criminal justice system. This piece constitutes the first concerted attempt to draw these findings together and to develop a broader argument about the workings of statecraft in contemporary Britain.

As such, we are driven by the call to re-examine the contingency of what are all too frequently taken as stable concepts in criminology.<sup>21</sup> As Aliverti et al. have recently argued, this can be captured in terms of the 'the criminal question': 'to study the criminal question is different from studying crime. It means that crime is not considered independently from the procedures by which it is defined, the instruments deployed in its administration and control and the politics and debates around criminal justice and public order.'<sup>22</sup> As decolonial and critical criminologists and social scientists of the Global South have shown, asking 'the criminal question' means to take seriously the relationship between imperialism,



criminology and punishment<sup>23</sup> that has so frequently been omitted from mainstream theory and practice.<sup>24</sup> In what follows we take such a perspective as our own point of departure in relation to debates around drugs and ‘county lines’.

### **On drugs enforcement, ‘county lines’ and narratives of crisis**

Across England and Wales, drug control has both historically and contemporaneously ‘fallen most heavily on the poor and visible minorities’.<sup>25</sup> Racially minoritised people are six times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police, with young Black people particularly ‘at risk’ of encountering the police and being made subject to searches under s23 of the Drugs Misuse Act (1971).<sup>26</sup> Throughout the period 2019/20, all racially minoritised groups were over-represented in police-recorded searches for drugs (33.8 per cent) when compared to their proportions in the general population (estimated 15.6 per cent). Comparatively, white people were under-represented in police searches for drugs, accounting for 50.4 per cent of searches for drugs against their proportion in the population (84.4 per cent).<sup>27</sup> While concerning, it is perhaps unsurprising that three-quarters of young people who encountered the police across London between 2018/19 were identified as belonging to a Black, Asian, ‘mixed’ or other minority ethnic group, reaffirming the perennial euphemism of the (un)reasonable suspicion-ness that governs police presumptions of Black criminality.<sup>28</sup>

Paradoxically, evidence drawn from official statistics illustrates that drug use is most prevalent amongst white university/college students, who acquire their drugs through ‘friends, neighbours, colleagues, or family members’.<sup>29</sup> Relatedly, Salinas-Edwards documents how ‘self-avowed’ drug-dealing is evenly distributed across racial and ethnic lines with approximately a quarter of dealers residing in households with annual incomes of \$75,000 [c. £59,000]. Yet, in contrast to the over-policing of racially minoritised people highlighted above, these ‘retail-level drug dealers who facilitate supply among their own respective suburban or “middle-class” populations go largely undetected and unsanctioned’. Characterised as a ‘silent majority’, such drug dealers and traffickers are generally ‘employed, educated and, predominantly white’, and yet operate with relative impunity due to their ‘race, privileged social standing or operational practices’.<sup>30</sup>

The distinct and divergent policing strategies that deliberately target racially marginalised groups and communities are premised upon an array of evidence-defying myths of Black criminality converging around racist stereotypical tropes that conflate poverty, drug use, drug supply, ‘gang-enabled’ violence, and anomic conditions.<sup>31</sup> Policed responses to ‘drug crimes’ are seemingly governed less by a need to control drug distribution or consumption and more as a strategy to defend excessively punitive regulation and control of negatively racialised groups and communities. The policy development and policing of drugs is predicated upon a ‘justificatory discourse for racialized over-policing . . . pre-figured by an archaeology of black law-breaking’ embodied in the historical trope of the Black drug dealer as the usual (or typical) suspect.<sup>32</sup> State articulations of ‘black law-breaking’ therefore serve to produce and justify what Williams and Clarke<sup>33</sup>

characterised as the implementation of increasingly complex and punishing penal apparatuses and strategies to assuage the (white) public's concerns about the perennially transmogrifying and racist stereotypes of young Black men as 'dangerous, violent and volatile'. Typifying what Garland termed the 'criminology of the other',<sup>34</sup> the contemporary culture of control relies upon racialised constructions which are symbolically framed and communicated as essential for protecting an imagined (read white) public, giving way to public demands for order that 'are not infrequently motivated by parochial desires for injustice, xenophobic antipathy toward others, or unattainable fantasies of absolute security'.<sup>35</sup>

It is against this backdrop of the racialised construction of the Black drug dealer and the pre-emptive policing of Black communities that we need to place emergent narratives of 'county lines'. To be clear, there are many police and academic accounts of where the 'county lines' model of drug distribution has emerged from, and why now. The National Crime Agency<sup>36</sup> proposed in 2015 that increased competition and levels of violence between inner-city 'drugs gangs' drove a new 'export' model. Academics have pointed to similar explanations, suggesting that the 'county lines' model is an example of innovation and profit maximisation by drug dealers,<sup>37</sup> or that it reflects technological advances where mobile phones and text messages are used to expand reach and avoid police detection.<sup>38</sup> Others point to 'criminogenic environmental conditions' such as low employment opportunities, substance misuse, or weaknesses in the UK care and welfare systems that, post-austerity, have produced vulnerable target groups ripe for exploitation.<sup>39</sup> Such explanations accept the reality of a new crime type that requires new, specific forms of criminal justice (or alternative) responses to protect young people and prosecute offenders.

And yet, dominant narratives that have played on the image of crisis, exceptionalism and newness need to be subjected to critical interrogation. There is a dearth of evidence to support the contention of an increase in the use and supply of (Class A) drugs as a result of 'county lines'. Indeed, some commentators have argued that county lines is not a new phenomenon,<sup>40</sup> and that such 'new' approaches are politically convenient, policy-friendly soundbites replete with 'drug war rhetoric and hyperbole' to sound tough on crime.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, and mirroring the racism at the heart of the VGM, implemented for the surveillance and monitoring of so-called 'gangs' in London,<sup>42</sup> we have evidence that the development of drug policing strategies to identify those 'at-risk' of involvement in 'county lines' again targets and stigmatises young Black men in particular. A simple reading of police intelligence reports produced by the London Metropolitan Police reveals that by 2020, 3,290 individuals were suspected of 'having a link or suspected link' to county lines and of these, 83 per cent belonged to racially minoritised groups, 92 per cent of whom were male.<sup>43</sup>

Mapping the 'career' of the 'county lines' category, we suggest that whilst there remains ambiguity about if, and why, 'county lines' indicative 'offences' such as drugs and trafficking offences are on the rise (both of which were declining or lower before the discovery of 'county lines activity' and the introduction of



Modern Slavery legislation),<sup>44</sup> the introduction of this crime label plays a specific social and cultural role that requires examination. Previous critical enquiry examined the extent to which emergent categories of 'crime' mapped to actual incidents of indicative 'offences'. For example, the seminal work of Hall and others on 'mugging' in 1940s America, and 1960s and 1970s Britain, revealed that the criminal category of the 'mugger' said little about the actual existence of 'mugging' forms of crime. Rather, the 'career' of the category 'mugger' drew on historical and contemporary racialised tropes about Black American, later imported on to Black British, 'criminality' that 'connote a whole complex of social themes' regarding a crisis in governance.<sup>45</sup> We similarly investigate the ways in which 'county lines' has tapped into existing racialised and classed imaginaries of the dangerous 'other'. Indeed, as the next section shows, there is an ambiguous convergence that conflates 'county lines', 'gangs', violence and most recently 'modern day slavery' with racially minoritised children and young people.

It is this social and cultural function of 'county lines' that we are concerned with here. This article is not specifically concerned with patterns of victimisation (albeit worthy of further enquiry), but their discursive and legal construction: that is to say, in retelling the story of 'county lines' through genealogical analysis and embedded empirical research to bring to the surface how and why Black boys and young men in particular again become constructed as a criminal problem to be dealt with.<sup>46</sup> What is new here is how notions of victimisation (including now of Black males who disproportionately appear as both county lines victims and offenders) are driving this nexus of activities to the same, familiar conclusion: that Black boys and young men pose a threat to vulnerable (white) populations and areas<sup>47</sup> as well as to 'their own kind', and that a range of surveillance, policing and courtroom tactics are required to solve this problem. We contend that, behind the language of safeguarding vulnerable children and adults, there are tropes of Black male criminality and white victimhood that have persisted from the mugger to the gang to the terrorist and the slave master that ultimately place these young men in a bind, caught in a nexus of safeguarding, surveillance and punishment. Even as they simultaneously elide the experiences of young Black women.<sup>48</sup>

### **From 'gangs' to 'county lines'**

Our analysis of policy documents and government reports locates 'county lines' as the continuity and extension of the failed Ending Gangs and Youth Violence (EGYV) programme, and indeed other drug policing and 'anti-gang' policies and policing operations that came before it. EGYV was launched by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2011. The strategy was launched after the Metropolitan Police shot and killed Mark Duggan, a young Black man who was under investigation by the Metropolitan Police's 'Operation Trident'. Operation Trident targeted gun crime thought by the Met to be specifically prevalent in the Black community and was later extended to the

Trident Gang Crime Command. Mark's death triggered the largest civil unrest the UK had seen in several decades, and EGYV was positioned in direct response to this. As Home Secretary Theresa May introduced in the first EGYV report, 'One thing that the riots in August did do was to bring home to the entire country just how serious a problem gang and youth violence has now become.'<sup>49</sup> On the government's own admission, 'the proportion of rioters known to be gang involved may be low – so too are the numbers of young people involved in gangs',<sup>50</sup> and yet, citing the disproportionate and devastating impact of gangs, the government sought to eliminate a 'propensity' for violence located within disadvantaged youth subcultures. Aiming to identify and disrupt the 'lifecycle' of a 'gang' member, the report proposed a programme of greater police powers but, suggesting that 'gang and youth violence is not a problem that can be solved by enforcement alone',<sup>51</sup> it also argued the need for greater collaborative working and information sharing between agencies, including those engaged in the safeguarding of young people.

Rather than offering new supportive 'interventions' for young people identified by the police as impacted by gang violence, the programme brought together a range of existing family intervention and support services.<sup>52</sup> A key focus of the 2011 programme was strengthening multi-agency partnerships; establishing multi-agency 'hubs' where police and other practitioners would co-locate, sharing their 'intelligence' about young people in 'gangs'.<sup>53</sup> Not everyone was comfortable with these plans, with Harding's 2015 'assessment' of EGYV<sup>54</sup> describing how professionals needed to be 'coaxed' into these partnership arrangements, due to fears that young people would be criminalised – a prescient sentiment, as we will see. In many ways, professional concerns about the government framing of youth violence as a 'gang' problem, and the precedence of information sharing to the approach (including via the VGM), were vindicated. The 2018 report by Amnesty named the activities of multi-agency partners, to whom information about gang nominals was routinely shared, as an 'Achilles heel' tactic, targeting Black boys and young men through, say, TV licensing, or children's social care, in the absence of (sufficient) evidence to pursue them on other bases.<sup>55</sup> Beyond this, there remained flaws in the internal logic of the government's anti-gangs agenda, with commentators noting the lack of a 'clear, evidence-based operational definition of a "gang" that can be measured or used in any sense by any actor'.<sup>56</sup>

And yet, 'county lines' can be located as entering the UK policy and policing agenda as a culmination of local 'problem profiling' and 'mapping' work carried out by local authorities under the EGYV programme.<sup>57</sup> This work was evaluated as 'highly significant' in identifying the 'emerging' phenomenon of 'county lines'. A specialist team of experts was seconded to EGYV to map the issue using data sets across local authority areas and to conduct interviews with front-line practitioners to build a picture of this 'emerging pattern of youth violence and drug trafficking'.<sup>58</sup> The National Crime Agency (NCA) baseline 'county lines' assessment<sup>59</sup> cited the findings of this profiling process as imperative in the emerging 'county lines' intelligence picture. What is more, once named as a

threat, government agencies, backed by the mass media, have persistently emphasised the urgent need to address it. Thus, in a follow-up briefing published a year later, the NCA<sup>60</sup> suggested that thirty police forces were now experiencing these supply practices, with an additional five reporting 'county lines' as an 'emergent crime'. The report also stated the regularity with which 'county lines' dealers travelled between exporting hubs and importing locations to restock and transport money, and, building on the presence of violence noted in the previous report, made mention of the use of weapons, specifically knives, as the most popular way for 'county lines' groups to arm themselves to protect against other criminal groups. Groups originating from London were described as 'predominantly' Black British or 'Afro Caribbean'; from Liverpool and Manchester as often 'white' and those from Birmingham as being of 'Asian ethnicity'. In the following years, narratives of crisis intensified: the NCA stated that it now believed 'county lines' to be present in some form in all police operating areas across England and Wales;<sup>61</sup> 270 different groups were said to be operating nationwide. The NCA suggested that this was a 'conservative estimate' and indeed, by 2018, it held that the number of known 'county lines' was around 2,000.<sup>62</sup>

The exploitation of children has been central to this ratcheting up of the 'county lines' narrative. The 2015 NCA baseline assessment<sup>63</sup> warned that 'county lines' 'almost always' involved the exploitation of vulnerable people, with young people who had been in care and those known to Children's and Youth Offending Services as particularly vulnerable (although a later assessment had this figure at 11 per cent for vulnerable young people).<sup>64</sup> Acknowledging this 'emerging' trend, the EGYV programme was rebranded in 2016 to Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation (EGVE), incorporating and centring the exploitation of children in the gangs' story.<sup>65</sup> The Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation programme named 'tackling county lines' as top of six key priority areas. In 2017/18, EGVE was 'pump primed' with almost £300,000 available to local areas to tackle 'county lines' with a specific focus on 'early intervention', implicating a range of agencies in the early detection and reporting of 'county lines' concerns.<sup>66</sup> Whilst the NCA opted to avoid 'gang' terminology in its 2015 baseline 'county lines' assessment,<sup>67</sup> EGVE located a 'hard core of gang members' as responsible for the exploitation of vulnerable people.<sup>68</sup>

The multi-agency, co-location, information sharing, profiling and intelligence gathering focus of the previous EGYV programme was reflected in the Home Office's first 'county lines' briefing for professionals, noting that:

County lines is a major, cross-cutting issue involving drugs, violence, gangs, safeguarding, criminal and sexual exploitation, modern slavery, and missing persons; and the response to tackle it involves the police, the National Crime Agency, a wide range of Government departments, local government agencies and VCS (voluntary and community sector) organisations.<sup>69</sup>

Such an approach would require a range of agencies to 'spot the signs' of 'county lines', and report concerns to Designated Safeguarding Leads, to children's social care, to the National Referral Mechanism and to the police.<sup>70</sup> In 2018 'county lines' entered safeguarding guidance in England,<sup>71</sup> in turn requiring a range of children's social care partnerships, multi-agency risk panels and specialist teams to identify and respond to the issue, with 'mapping' of young people using social care, police and other agency 'intelligence' noted as best practice.<sup>72</sup> The language of safeguarding had rapidly overlaid previous more punitive approaches to the same young people, described in the original EGYV report as 'targeting people like Boy X and the damage they do to themselves, their families and the communities in which they grow up'.<sup>73</sup>

Despite this imperative towards safeguarding vulnerable young people, tackling 'county lines' was simultaneously introduced as a major theme in the government's 2018 Serious Violence Strategy. Here, a rise in violent incidents involving knives was directly linked to 'county lines' drug dealing. The Serious Youth Violence strategy acquired and continued the funding of EGVE and similarly integrated the language of child safeguarding alongside the policing of violent 'gangs'. It noted that a combination of policing and safeguarding action would make 'the county lines operating model inoperable and unattractive',<sup>74</sup> reflecting the 'Achilles heel' tactics that already characterised police activity related to the VGM. In 2019, the Home Office launched its County Lines Programme which to date has 'closed down' 1,500 county lines, arrested over 7,000 individuals, and 'safeguarded' 4,000 'vulnerable' people. The programme was buoyed with £145 million investment for three years, on top of £65 million invested since 2019 for tackling 'county lines'. The Home Office states the programme's aim was to 'tackle the most violent and exploitative distribution model yet seen'.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, there has been an 807 per cent increase in children referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in relation to 'county lines', making up 16 per cent of all NRM referrals in the third quarter of 2020.<sup>76</sup>

But what is the outcome of the invigoration of 'safeguarding' as a central tenet of the government's anti-gangs strategy? In their fieldwork, both Koch and Wroe observed practitioners making decisions about the appropriate pathways for 'county lines'-profiled young people. They noted vague classifications of 'victim', 'offender', 'gang member' or 'associate' as having a net-widening effect that did not clearly indicate safety for the young people involved. The following was a typical response from professionals mandated with applying such arbitrary distinctions: 'in my opinion, the 14 year old will be at higher risk than the 17 year old that already knows the ropes around, you know, I'm not saying they're both [not] at risk but how do we decide who to take and who not to take?'.<sup>77</sup> Professional anxiety about young people being criminalised as a result of their being profiled as 'county lines' affiliated was palpable and seemingly justified when some professionals concluded that 'the exploiters are probably the 18-25s and we can and do share that with the police. They want to do proactive police operations'.<sup>78</sup>

These observations seem to indicate a lack of clarity amongst professionals, compelled to work together across fairly distinct policing and child welfare duties, as to what exactly they were there to do, and how. These tensions played out continuously during Wroe's and Koch's respective fieldwork, for example when news of police 'crackdowns' on county lines offenders was celebrated in partnership meetings, despite no one knowing how many of those arrested were young people.

The development of the language surrounding 'county lines' and the emerging insights from fieldwork conducted with front-line professionals then shed a critical light on the narrative that county lines is 'new'. Rather, it appears the racialised objects of the government's Ending Gangs and Youth Violence (EGYV) strategy of 2011 have today been 'looped', repackaged and repurposed to legitimise the pre-emptive targeting and policing of young Black men in particular as central to the state's response to 'county lines' and other racialised crime tropes.<sup>79</sup> But the story does not end there, for one of the most puzzling shifts in recent policy has been the linking of 'county lines' with 'modern slavery' policies. As the next section shows, this fusion has not only intensified processes of surveillance and control in the name of safeguarding the vulnerable, but has also introduced punishment through the back door, as the same young people who are identified as 'slaves' by the government can also find themselves subject to prosecution for offences under 'modern slavery' legislation itself.

### **From 'county lines' to 'modern slavery'**

While 'modern slavery' has been on the international humanitarian agenda since the early 2000s,<sup>80</sup> it only became a pressing domestic concern for crime politics under Theresa May's tenure as home secretary (2010–2016). The Modern Slavery Act, implemented in 2015, is an unprecedented piece of legislation. It creates, on the one hand, a prosecution tool for slavery, servitude and human trafficking offences. On the other, it also provides a complete defence for certain offences, including drugs offences, that have been committed by victims of exploitation. Parliament's initial focus in passing the legislation was not on 'county lines' activity; rather, attention was largely focused on victims of human trafficking crossing national borders from Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa into Britain. This debate was initially focused on the figure of the feminised sex worker – the immigrant woman from the Global South or Eastern Europe – who had been deceived and trafficked across borders for purposes of sexual exploitation by organised criminal networks.<sup>81</sup>

Spicer has suggested that the initial connection between 'county lines' and 'modern slavery' was made by law enforcement officials who saw the legislation as an opportunity to prosecute drug dealers for crimes other than drugs offending which were said to have an insufficient deterrent effect<sup>82</sup> (another Achilles heel tactic?). Prosecuting these same offenders for 'human trafficking' charges



was believed to carry a higher moral stigma and potentially more severe punishment. Once this connection was made, it took on a life of its own. In the same way the term 'modern slavery' had begun to spill into a range of other areas that had previously not been the focus of Parliament, so 'county lines' became increasingly cited as a site of 'modern slavery', with bodies like the NCA making repeated reference to it. In 2018, the Home Office published a typology of 'modern slavery' which recognised seventeen different types of slavery and human trafficking in Britain today. County lines was officially recognised as an example of 'criminal exploitation', described as 'forced gang related activity', and elaborated upon as 'gang related criminality, most commonly related to drugs but also including knives and firearms'.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, an official, cross-party review conducted into the Modern Slavery Act in 2019 stated that UK nationals now represent 'by far the highest proportion of potential victims', and that the growth of British children identified as slaves was 'in large part due to the rise in cases of county lines and other forms of criminal exploitation'.<sup>84</sup>

The 'discovery' of county lines as a problem of 'modern slavery' has started to generate a significant amount of attention, being generally celebrated as yet another victory for safeguarding the vulnerable. And yet, our empirical research shows otherwise. At the front line, as Wroe indicated above, it has resulted in murky questions about who is to be entered into the National Referral Mechanism as a potential slave and who is not. Koch also found in her research with mothers of children caught up in the criminal justice system that many had been advocating for years to have their children entered into the NRM, but had been rebutted each time they had approached the subject with a front-line worker. Take the example of Pat, parent to a 25-year-old young Black man from South London. Her son had first started going missing at the age of 15, being arrested on numerous occasions for drug offences. His mother's suspicion, however, that he was being forced to deal drugs by others was repeatedly dismissed: teachers considered him to be a problem child deserving of being excluded from school, social workers blamed her for being an 'angry' and 'possessive' parent, and the police would treat him as a 'straightforward perpetrator'. When her son started going missing repeatedly, her desperate calls to the police and other professionals were ignored. Over the years, she saw her son get involved in more serious forms of criminality, both as a victim and as an offender. In 2020, he was arrested for a violent offence, pleaded guilty and made to serve a lengthy prison sentence.

But more so, even where a young person has been found to have been a 'modern slave' by the NRM, such a finding does not in and by itself have a positive impact upon that person's life. Because there is no statutory obligation to extend support to a child found to have been a 'modern slave', it is at the local authority's discretion to decide what forms of safeguarding and support might be appropriate for that person. In both Koch's and Wroe's research, we repeatedly found that – often for lack of resources and funding, both at least partially the result of austerity politics and cuts – a young person who had been found to have been



'exploited' and 'trafficked' did not have any meaningful social or material support extended to them. What is more, even where support was extended, it was often only piecemeal, short sighted or, worse, even worked to split up families and social networks. Koch conducted long-term ethnographic fieldwork on one of the country's largest postindustrial council estates in the country, now identified by the local police force as both an 'import' and an 'export' area for county lines. Many mothers on the estate were extremely reluctant to engage with the police: 'saving' their children from county lines dealers meant that their families might be broken up, with children moved into care and often being relocated to care homes in other parts of the country (a finding reflected in Wroe's research, in which 19 per cent of 'county lines' case files reviewed mentioned the possibility of 'relocation').<sup>85</sup>

Even where families were not broken up, however, 'safeguarding' efforts typically failed to address the larger structural inequalities that many young men and their families face, resulting in a situation where, as one mother put it, 'they are setting our children up to fail'. In one case that Koch closely followed, a 15-year-old male youth received a positive 'conclusive grounds' NRM decision (that he had been trafficked) and was treated by the authorities as a victim to be safeguarded. After months of partnership working between the various professionals involved – police, social workers, probation officers and housing officers – the family was offered a transferred house move out of their local authority area to a different constituency, about an hour's ride away on the train. Koch visited the family a year after they had been moved to a house in the middle of the countryside, surrounded by open fields. The family felt lonely and isolated, being removed from their social networks with no easy public transport options that would allow them to travel back for regular visits. Because there were no meaningful employment opportunities in the local area, the father in the family was forced to go on benefits and when his universal credit payments were stopped due to an administrative error, the family became reliant on the food bank. His mother explained that following the move, none of the professionals had reached out to him again, nor had the promise of helping him find training and education opportunities materialised. Now, her son had recently gotten into drug dealing again, 'but now they are saying that he is a perpetrator and can be prosecuted again'. These observations reflect national data about the use of 'relocation' as a response to exploitation.<sup>86</sup>

The example demonstrates the meaninglessness of a finding of 'modern slavery' and 'exploitation' in the context of structural exclusion and poverty. It also brings home the slippery slope between victim and perpetrator and how failure to act in ways that the authorities consider appropriate can easily result in a person crossing the invisible threshold to becoming a suspect in the eyes of the state. Indeed, in practice this meant that a positive finding by the NRM could serve as a conduit for further control and potentially punishment and banishment of a young person who found that their daily movements and associations with

others now became the object of tight control.<sup>87</sup> As noted earlier, multi-agency meetings in relation to 'gang' policies have allowed for police intelligence to be shared widely across partners, resulting in tight forms of surveillance of young people and their family members and friends. This was also the case with 'modern slaves'.

To give just one example, in Koch's fieldwork with a multi-agency partnership centred around modern slavery and county lines, a 15-year-old mixed-race young man who had received a positive NRM decision was subjected to just such control. During a multi-agency meeting, police officers raised concerns that he had been seen in the company of a 'suspicious crowd' – other young people suspected to be drug dealers – on a neighbouring estate to his own. The young man's youth offending team (YOT) worker decided to pay him a 'surprise visit' with the consent of the police to inquire about his recent movements and associations. At the surprise visit, Koch witnessed the young man being questioned in detail about his social life. He was furthermore told that 'if you are not careful you can get yourself arrested and prosecuted'. The young man's justification that he had been 'hanging out' with the 'crowd' because they were his extended family members was noted but the YOT worker stated that he and police would keep a 'close eye on the young man'.

Once a young person has been found to have crossed the threshold from victim to perpetrator, the punitive criminal justice machinery kicks back with potentially far-ranging effects. Koch followed the first ever trials under Modern Slavery legislation, both on the defence and the prosecution side, from 2017 onwards. This research showed that young people found to have been 'modern slaves' continue to be prosecuted for drugs charges. While this is not in itself a contradiction – for the NRM decision is not legally binding – it does potentially pose problems to the principle of non-prosecution for victims of human trafficking and modern slavery. It also flies in the face of the s.45 defence, the so-called 'exploitation defence' made available under the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Defence lawyers who run the defence for their clients often struggle to do so successfully as they fail to convince the jury of the credibility of the defence: 'the public have a particular understanding of what a slave, an exploited person looks like', one defence lawyer explained to Koch, 'and [these defendants – young black men on trial for drugs charges] just don't look like victims, they don't look like what the public thinks of when you hear the word "exploited" or "slaves"'.

In some cases, the difficulties that defence lawyers experience in successfully running the s.45 defence is further compounded by the fact that their clients face other deeply punitive doctrines including 'joint enterprise'. In one case, a 15-year-old 'county lines' victim who was running the s.45 defence in relation to drugs charges was also being prosecuted for a joint enterprise murder. Here, the prosecution's repeated reference to the young man's alleged gang membership not only acted to discredit the s.45 defence, but might have also influenced the jury's view as to the person's culpability under joint enterprise. The judge used the

young person's involvement in 'county lines' as an aggravating factor, giving him an extended life sentence. The defendant's sister, a 35-year-old social worker by training, who had acted as her brother's guardian throughout trial, told Koch:

Children's safeguarding in the UK is poor. That's the overarching issue. Because if they were safeguarded, a lot of these county lines, child exploitation matters wouldn't be happening. The first point of reporting, 9 times out of 10, it is the parents, and the parents are not being listened to. And then the children end up in a very biased and racist criminal justice system, where you're just feeding your kids to the wolves . . . And it's just really bad because as there is a growing issue with child exploitation, there is a growing issue with the number of children who are just falling, falling through the gaps, and also, like, are just – nothing is coming off them.

However, when turning our attention to prosecutions brought under the Modern Slavery Act in relation to 'county lines' dealers, only a handful of prosecutions have been brought against them under this legislation due to the complexity and cumbersome nature of these prosecutions. We were unable to find a complete list of prosecutions brought under the laws for county lines dealers and requests to government agencies in this respect have been ignored. An analysis of the media coverage on these cases, however, has revealed that those convicted under the Act for human trafficking charges – the maximum penalty for which is life in prison – have been brought predominantly against young Black males, now identified as the 'slave masters' of today.<sup>88</sup> Even more ironically perhaps, some of those prosecuted under human trafficking charges have been found to have been 'modern slaves' by the NRM or might be running the s.45 'exploitation defence' for drugs charges at the same trial. Alleged slave masters and slaves are united in the same body of the Black working-class youth, literally blurring the boundary of victim and perpetrator.

In short, far from 'liberating' young Black men from their exploiters, the use of modern slavery legislation and policies in the case of 'county lines' runners has revealed the hitherto darkest step in our narrative, for what we have seen is that it has only served to further entrench the over-policing, prosecution and punishment of young Black men, now in the name of protecting the public from 'slavery' and 'trafficking' offences. This is perhaps not an accident: as we shall argue now, it speaks to the (re)workings of state power at a time of deep social, political and economic crisis.

### **Conclusion: county lines, racism and the British state**

'County lines' has often been presented as a new and unprecedented phenomenon, newspapers have played on the newness of the threat; government and other official documents have emphasised the unprecedented nature of the phenomenon; and academics too have often, either deliberately or inadvertently,

played into tropes of exceptionalism and crisis rather than critically interrogating its emergence. By contrast, we have started from a different premise. Rather than taking a position on whether county lines 'exist' as a matter of fact or not, we have, drawing on the tradition of Hall et al., attempted to analyse it as a discursive theme and to identify the forms of state power that have been authorised in its wake. Our piece, drawing on genealogical inquiry, has shown that doing so is a productive exercise. Thus, pre-emptive drug policing is heavily racialised, disproportionately targeting Black and minoritised young men. The specific discourse of county lines emerged out of concerns over 'gangs' following the police killing of Mark Duggan, and metamorphosed more recently into the language and tools of 'modern slavery' and 'human trafficking'. As Bhattacharyya et al. have recently argued, the story of 'county lines' is not an innocent narrative. Rather, it 'is about familiar crimes (read: urban, black) occurring in new places (read: non-urban, white) . . . The real fear is that black criminality is migrating out of black urban enclaves and spreading, virus-like, into unsuspecting parts of the country.'<sup>89</sup>

We would concur with this point: county lines activity does not hold as an objective crisis that suddenly appeared in 2015, but is an exemplar of a political crisis in the making that elaborately repurposes racialised criminalised tropes. And it is this point, too, that can help us make sense of the data we have presented – namely the contradictory, murky and sometimes outright negative consequences of government's and practitioners' attempts to safeguard those who, in the government's own terms, have now been identified as worthy of protection and care. Today the largest group of British 'slaves' are children who have suffered from criminal exploitation, in particular with reference to county lines.<sup>90</sup> Once more, while government narratives have tended to celebrate the fact that young drug-runners are now increasingly recognised as victims, rather than as suspects or criminals, this article has told a more critical story. Young men, often of colour, continue to be disadvantaged, if not actively penalised and criminalised by these policies. They continue to be profiled by the police and multi-agency safeguarding partners at a hugely disproportionate rate; they fail to be entered into the National Referral Mechanism; the help needed fails to be extended to them even where they have been entered and been found to be 'modern slaves'; they continue to be prosecuted for drug offences, despite being found to have been victims; and, worst of all, they now also face charges for human trafficking under the Modern Slavery Act itself. The latter brings home a deep irony that has gone unacknowledged: that the same young person can indeed be slave and 'slave master', or 'trafficked' and 'human trafficker', to adopt the language of the legislation, performing the role of victim and perpetrator alike.

We are not the only ones to identify these contradictions in the application of 'modern slavery' policies. On the contrary, these have begun to feature in news stories and in policy circles, where professionals have begun to express concerns that policies are being misused or not used correctly.<sup>91</sup> And yet, we are more sceptical. For us, this is not just about the 'correct' use of the Modern Slavery Act,

or 'safeguarding' young men 'properly', but indicative of a much deeper problem. To not assume so would mean to fall foul of the fallacy of technocratic rule; as Fatsis has recently reminded us, 'mainstream thinking within criminology and legal scholarship more broadly treats crime as a matter of "technocratic evaluation" rather than an issue of political contestation'.<sup>92</sup> Yet, such depoliticising portrayals not only expose contemporary criminology's misplaced belief in the possibility of neutral research and application but also reduce our public understanding of a politics of crime to 'a mere "contest" between tactics and technique, thereby misleading us into thinking about crime and politics as an odd couple rather than as intimate bedfellows'.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, as a long line of critical criminologists, from Stuart Hall to Paul Gilroy to contemporary work in decolonial scholarship has shown,<sup>94</sup> crime itself is a political resource mobilised by the state in its hegemonic pursuit of moral and social order.

This, in turn, leads us to our final point: what the tale of 'county lines' tells us about the workings of state power in contemporary Britain. We would argue that what is at stake here is a particular project of statecraft-making, a (re)working of modern state power in times of deep political/economic/social crisis. Over four decades ago, Stuart Hall et al. forcefully argued that the emergence of the category of the 'mugger' appeared at a moment in time when the British state had come under attack and when large-scale dissatisfaction with the welfare state had set the conditions for the rise of a law and order state. Similarly, the British state today is in a deep state of crisis. We have seen more than ten years of austerity rule and multiple recessions and rampant inequality.<sup>95</sup> This has resulted in widespread dissatisfaction with the government, as indicated in voter withdrawal, as well as more popular forms of uprising and protests, those of Black Lives Matter and wider campaigns against the over-policing and under-protection of racially minoritised communities. In this climate, the British state has re-invented the enemy from within in the figure of the 'county lines runner' and, more so, the modern day slave master.<sup>96</sup> 'County lines' becomes a template, premised upon the successful utilisation of the wilfully vague 'gangs' narrative politically deployed in order to convey a 'fabrication of social order' through an authoritarianism driven by the pre-emptive pursuit and the violent criminalisation of the transmogrifying Black criminal 'other'.<sup>97</sup>

Where then does this leave us? What can we expect from policy and law in the years to come? Needless to say, we are concerned at what comes next, and whom it will harm in the name of public order and, now, safeguarding. Hall et al. warned that the moral panic around 'mugging' was central to the making of a 'soft' law and order state, one which would disproportionately target some of Britain's most stigmatised and minoritised subjects. It appears that four decades later, this authoritarianism is, once more, coming into full force. One only has to look at some of the bills that are currently going through Parliament. At the time of writing, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act has introduced a Serious Violence Duty that will compel local agencies, including education, health and



social care, to work together to share intelligence and develop plans to tackle 'serious violence'. Simultaneously the Serious Violence Reduction Order, also introduced under the Act, will grant the police suspicionless stop and search powers which human rights charities, and the Home Office itself, have already conceded are likely to disproportionately impact racially minoritised individuals.<sup>98</sup> Profiling and intelligence-sharing between these agencies across local and national geographical borders is a core principle of the Serious Violence Duty, one that is frequently underpinned in the guidance by the necessity of tackling cross (county) border 'county lines' networks.<sup>99</sup>

It is in light of such blatant authoritarianism that we think that urgent counter-narratives and counter-action are needed that push the boundaries of the debate. We are concerned that we need to move beyond the idea of the 'enemy from within', a politically expedient narrative that divides Black and minoritised communities into 'victims' and 'offenders', working through strategies of divide and rule that are reminiscent of colonialism. Significantly, if the objective (for some) of their involvement in professional harm-reduction work, research or campaigning on the issue of 'county lines' is to rescue or 'empower' disenfranchised youth, then the conversation needs to move beyond these limited, and limiting, categorisations. Rooting the county lines discourse in simplistic and binary categorisations of victim and perpetrator not only draws clear lines where many have already observed they cannot be drawn,<sup>100</sup> it works to (purposefully) depoliticise and mask a long-standing and persistent 'crimes' production agenda that harms racially marginalised groups and communities, and to de-contextualise the lived realities of those who are subject to it (a persistent imperialist humanitarian trope).<sup>101</sup> In foregrounding the political trajectory of the county lines 'category' by re-historicising and re-politicising it, we create the conditions in which the political agency of those subject to it can be asserted, opening a space in which narratives and practices of resistance can surface. Yet this is only a first step in what is a much bigger task at hand. In the end, this is a task that requires us as scholars to leave the narrow confines of academic debate and to take a committed and principled stance to resist the racist policing of Black and racially minoritised youth.

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