



THE SCALE OF THE ISSUE

An estimated **27,000** children in England identified as a gang member (Children's Commissioner, 2019)



Of the child victims who went through the National Referral Mechanism in Q3 2021, the biggest group was for criminal exploitation

**(47%)**

This reflects the growth in 'county lines' cases.

According to the National Crime Agency (NCA),



of those involved in County Lines are male.

During COVID-19,

**CRIMINAL GANGS DRESSED CHILDREN AS KEYWORKERS**



(for example, Deliveroo workers) to deliver drugs (Children's Society, 2020).

In Q3 2021,



county lines referrals were flagged, accounting for 15 per cent of all modern slavery referrals received in the quarter. This, however, is only the tip of the iceberg.

There are **1000**

different County Lines operating in the UK. The majority originate from London, West Midlands and Merseyside.



The profit per line is more than **£800,000** a year.

This results in an overall profit annually of more than **£800,000,000**



DIG DEEPER

County lines is a form of criminal exploitation where urban gangs persuade, coerce or force children and young people to store drugs and money and/or transport them to suburban areas, market towns and coastal towns. County lines gangs are organised criminal networks who are constantly refining their operations to avoid detection resulting in the signs of exploitation changing and becoming increasingly subtle.

They may, for example:

- target victims who do not fit existing stereotypes such as young people from more affluent backgrounds and girls, who are less likely to be picked up by the police
- use platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok to target victims
- use holiday accommodation, including airbnbs, caravans and hotels, as a base for their operations so that they are more difficult to detect.

County lines can also involve cuckooing, where dealers take over a local property, usually belonging to a vulnerable person, to use as a base for their criminal activity.





## WHY AND HOW DO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE GET DRAWN INTO COUNTY LINES?

It's important to understand that the criminals behind county lines are ruthless but organised gangs. They use sophisticated techniques to coerce children and shocking levels of violence to keep them compliant.

### Targeted

In broad terms, young people are targeted and chosen - the exploiter usually seeks out those that are marginalised and vulnerable.

### Coerced

Coercion may involve glamorising their lifestyle while developing the young person's trust by including them and making them feel wanted and protected. Often, a gang member will befriend the young person, buying them gifts like branded clothing and trainers, mobile phones and food. They will spend a lot of time making them feel special - as much as is needed to build trust. The young person will gradually be drawn into their lifestyle, introduced to other members of the gang and trained up in what they are doing.



### Hooked and trapped

The young person will begin to feel a sense of belonging - as though they are a member of the gang with a sense of identity within the group, possibly being given more responsibility and a bigger role - which can become dependence. But ultimately, their treatment at the hands of their exploiters usually starts to become unpleasant for example with threatening behaviour, blackmail, violence and sexual assaults.

Physical and mental abuse are common, along with threats of violence or death to their family members if they try to leave the gang. Despite this, child victims may not even realise that they are being exploited. They may believe that the members of the gang are their friends and that they are being looked after.





## REFLECTION

Read Luke 18 v15-17

A litmus test for understanding the gospel of Jesus Christ and the coming of the kingdom He proclaims, is our attitude towards children. In this passage, people bring children to Jesus to be blessed. We can all identify with wanting to recognise the preciousness of the child and the precariousness of its future. Yet the disciples tell people to stop – they see the kingdom as being about bigger things such as justice, worship and fellowship. Jesus reminds them that these larger signs of the kingdom only operate by recognising and celebrating the most vulnerable people. Let the children come to me – to such as these belong to the kingdom of God.

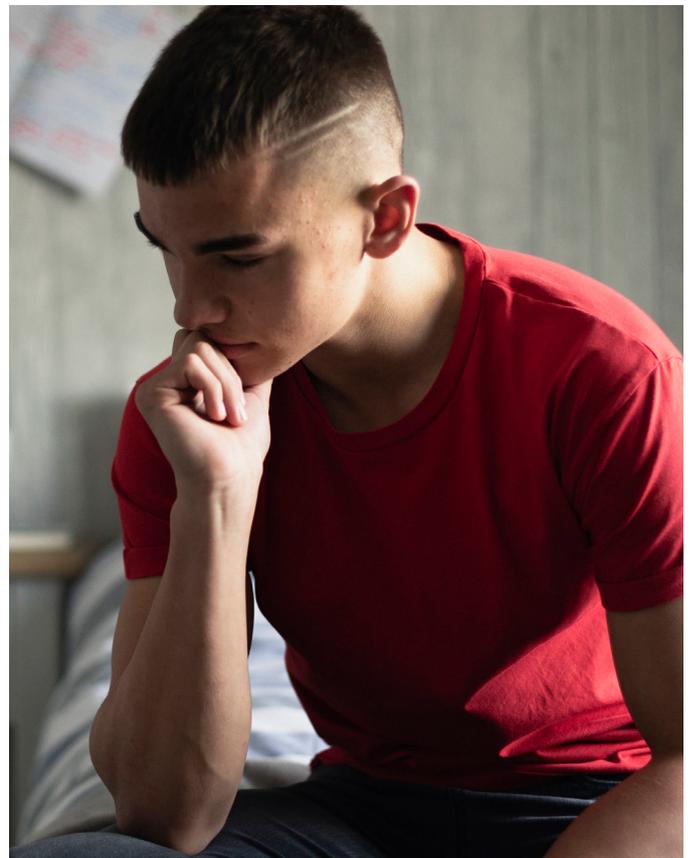
- Why is our response to the exploitation and abuse of children so fundamental to understanding the true nature of God's kingdom?
- What can we do better to ensure all our efforts to enable this coming kingdom – worship, fellowship, witness – can pass this key measure of how children are recognised, received and celebrated?
- Make some resolutions of how you can better recognise and witness to the miracle that the kingdom of God belongs to children.



## PRAYER

*Heavenly Father, as you call us to receive your coming kingdom, help us to recognise the priority you give to the most vulnerable – especially to children. Teach us to order our worship, our witness, and our fellowship in ways that extend this invitation, so that those who most desperately desire your blessing may be noticed and embraced in the common life of grace and mercy. We pray through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Amen.*





**A STORY OF HOPE  
- SIAN OWEN, “THE COUNTY LINES LADY”**

Sian Owen is an ordinary activist who has worked tirelessly to fight modern slavery and county lines in Bridgwater. Having attended The Clewer Initiative’s Hidden Voices course, Sian became the voluntary coordinator of the local action group, leading a “toilet door” sticker campaign and organising a public event to mark Anti-Slavery Day. After this, Sian became the project worker for a pilot Victim Support project, “Hidden Voices Somerset” and began to work fulltime at a safehouse.

During lockdown, Sian trained village agents online which not only built good relationships, but also resulted in village agents being comfortable to come to her with concerns, which she was then able to take to the police or GLAA.

She also started a community initiative to build resilience against County Lines in the most deprived communities in Bridgwater. The small group, led with the support of council leaders and police, reached around 800 people. She is now working on a major diversionary project aimed at young people on the key housing estates.

Sian is an amazing networker and her face is so well-known locally that she is often called the “county lines lady” by people who see her out and about. There are many volunteers that have played a key role in this work, but Sian has led, inspired and kept beating the drum for county lines awareness in very difficult circumstances.



**SPOTLIGHT ON THE CLEWER INITIATIVE’S  
BREAKING COUNTY LINES COURSE**

Breaking County Lines was designed to enable churches and communities to understand and raise awareness of county lines and spot the signs of its presence. It also looks at ways of building resilience in our communities with an emphasis on the protection of children, young people and vulnerable adults.

**Train the Trainer online courses**

We also run Train the Trainer courses for those who want to take the Breaking County Lines course out to their own communities as well as practitioner forums for those who have already attended the county lines courses.

Courses are available for church groups and statutory organisations with adapted course materials for each type of group (both secular and faith materials are available).

**Breaking County Lines seminar for parents, grandparents and guardians**

We have recently pioneered a new County Lines resource for parents, grandparents and guardians. The seminar provides an introduction to county lines; how parents and grandparents should respond to the issue; the signs to look out for and how to talk to children about it.

If you would like to find out more about the courses and upcoming course dates, please email us at [clewerinitiative@churchofengland.org](mailto:clewerinitiative@churchofengland.org)





**ACTION 3 – TRAINING**

A central part of The Clewer Initiative’s mission is to provide training for individuals, churches and community groups. Our hope is that through providing up-to-date and relevant training, people will grow in their awareness of the issue, confidence to spot signs of modern slavery and know what to do with these suspicions.

We have courses on homelessness, county lines, women & exploitation, and modern slavery in general. We also have training written specifically for church wardens, people involved in Food Banks or people in rural communities.

Some of resources can be downloaded and used as the foundation for a bespoke seminar. Others are in the form of an online course, run centrally by The Clewer Initiative’s expert trainers.

**Visit**



<https://theclewerinitiative.org/training-courses>

and consider what course you could put on for your friends and neighbours this year.



**THE COUNTY LINES PSALM**

*The gang leader is my shepherd,  
I shall not ask.*

*He makes me lie down in unheated flats;  
He leads me beside needle-strewn stairwells;  
He enslaves my soul.*

*He leads me down windswept streets  
For his own profit.*

*As I walk down the darkest alley, I feel evil;  
For he is with me;*

*My phone and my stash, they cling to me.  
He prepares every deal for me in the presence of  
my enemies;*

*My head it drips with sweat;  
My water bottle is empty.  
Surely ruthlessness and cruelty shall stalk me  
All the days of my life,  
And I shall live in an unfurnished home  
My whole short life.*

*Rt Revd Simon Burton-Jones,  
the Bishop of Tonbridge*

