



Policing vulnerability in illicit drug markets in the UK

Project team:

- Prof Ross Coomber (University of Liverpool) - Project Lead
- Prof Charlie Lloyd (University of York) - CI
- Dr Kate Brown (University of York) - CI
- Dr Tobias Kammergaard (University of York) – Research Associate
- Dr Chris Devany (University of York) - Research Associate

Historical Background to the Research

What the police 'police' is historically specific

- Some acts that used to be policed/illegal (e.g. 'homosexuality') are no longer policed/illegal
- Some acts that are now policed used to be 'invisible' (e.g. domestic violence) or were legally sanctioned
- Over time, generally, there has been a growth in better understanding 'victims' and vulnerability (e.g. domestic violence; sexual violence; mental illness; modern day slavery)

Child Sexual Exploitation Scandals – Rotherham / Rochdale etc.,

- Disastrous failure of policing (and e.g. social services/local authorities) to protect those they should be protecting
- Those that were let down were often seen by police (and other 'authorities') as trouble makers or complicit in their own abuse (and thus undeserving)
- Outrage
- Changed the whole 'vulnerability'/exploitation landscape for policing

County Lines drug supply –

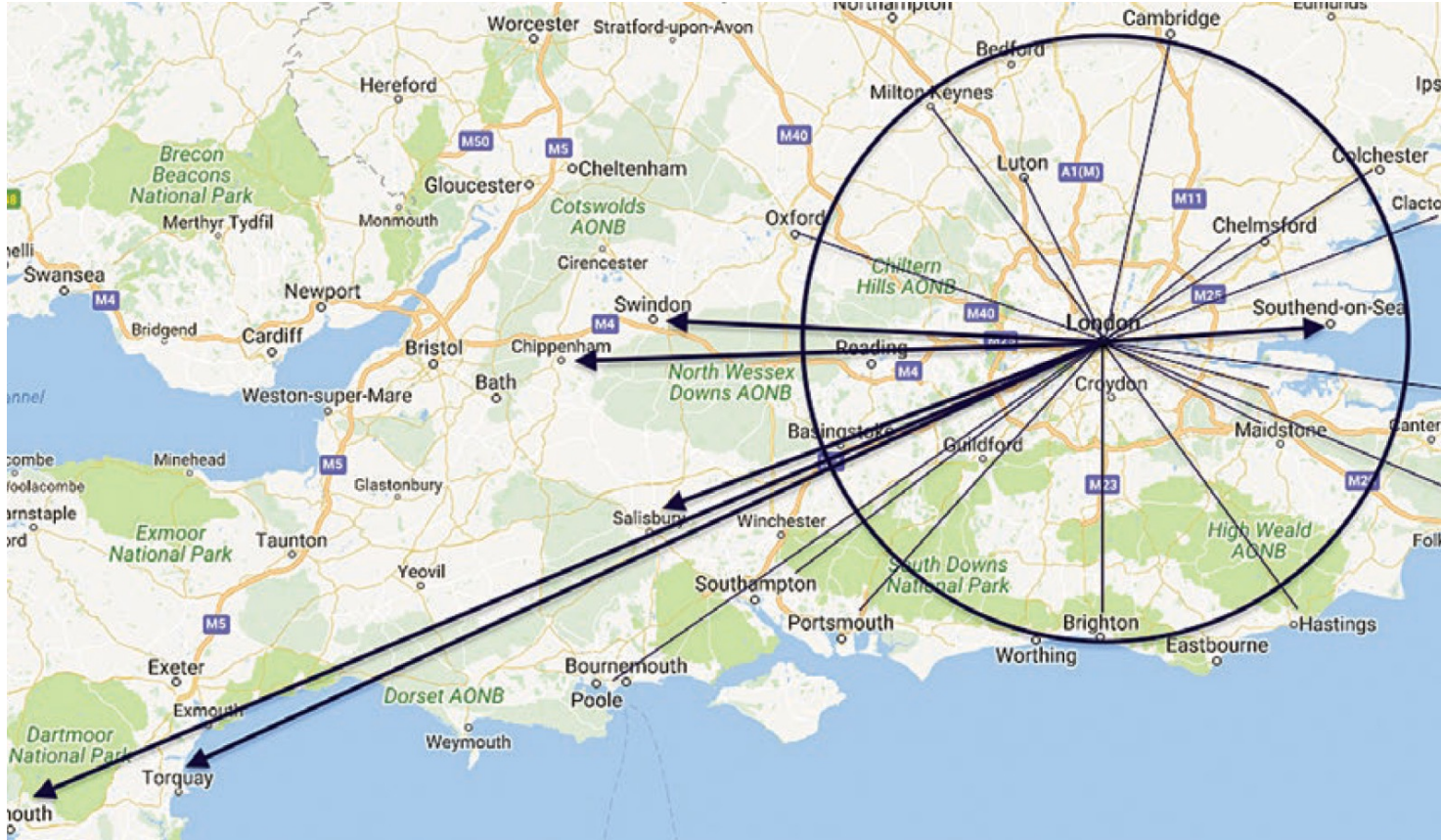
- Last 25 years – changes in how the drug dealer is understood
- involves vulnerable/exploited individuals and young people that would historically have been seen simply as criminals and dealt with as such
- In the new victim/vulnerability context where policing is seen to have failed victims this is no longer possible

This study is about the policing of vulnerability in County Lines drug markets.

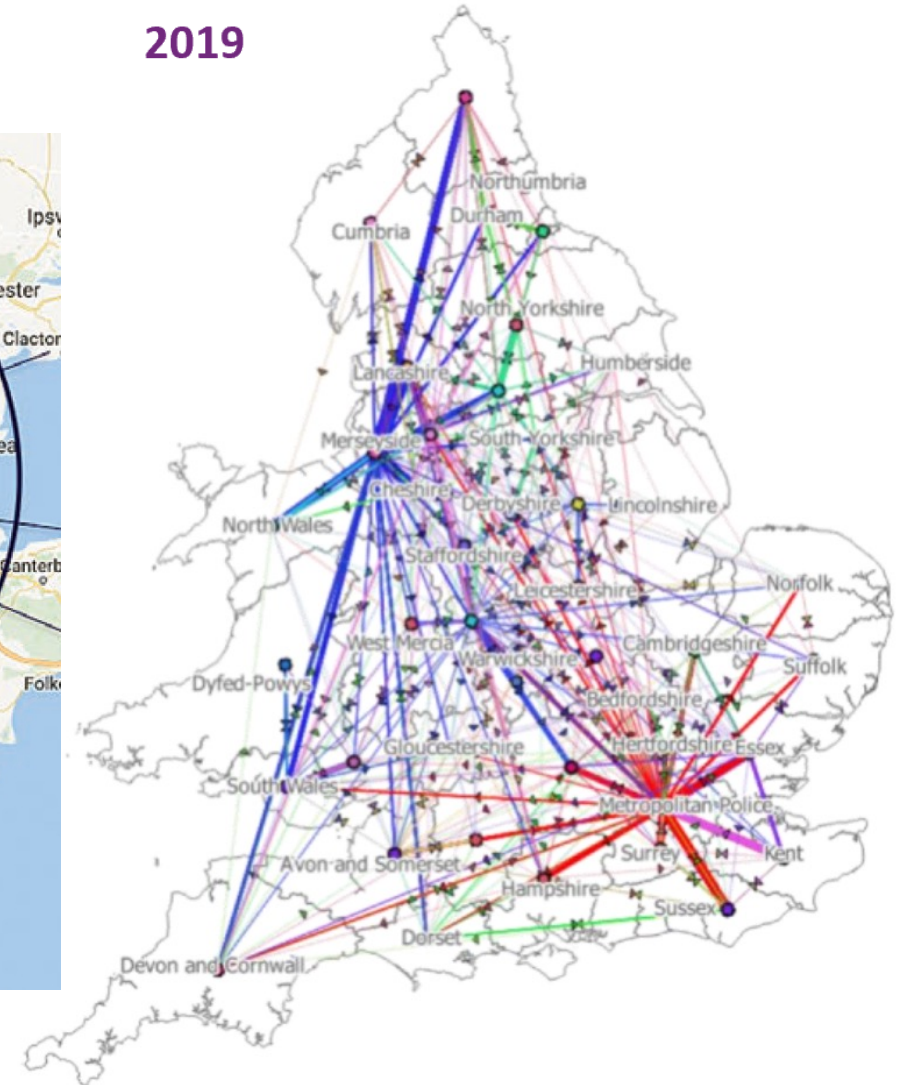
- CL is a method for transporting and selling drugs from e.g. city hubs (e.g. London / Liverpool / Manchester / Birmingham / Glasgow) across geographical distance to distant towns/cities (Not [totally] New) but...
- Often involves using sellers/runners from the hubs to establish sell rather than simply leaving it to local dealers (New [although mixed economy in place])
- Involves using unprecedented numbers/levels of vulnerable/exploited young people (most often 14-17 years) and others – (this is mostly new and – arguably – the most important characteristic of CL)*
- 'Cuckooing' – taking over vulnerable people's homes to operate from
 - *n.b. CL does not 'need' to use vulnerable/exploited YP and could function without using them in this way but there are advantages to it (YP are 'disposable'/replaceable; cheap; can be manipulated; liable to 'lesser' legal sanctions)

'County Lines' Drug Supply

2012



2019



Issues raised by the project:

- CL fairly special case? e.g. young people arrested will be selling drugs; may be carrying weapons, and they may even be exploiting other vulnerable people themselves (criminal but also vulnerable).
 - 'Spectrum' of exploitation/vulnerability and harm/s
 - Cuckooing victims
 - The vulnerable may not either recognise themselves as vulnerable and/or may reject the label
- Aim for the project – to develop/pilot a working definition of vulnerability/exploitation for all cases that the police and partners can work with effectively.

- The police have guidelines on vulnerability but, in reality, ‘on the ground’, especially in relation to County Lines are struggling how to best police it
- We (the project) have aims that are to *improve the experience of, and the outcomes of, the policing of vulnerability for both the police and the victims/abused/exploited*

Partners



ESRC Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre

- £10m, 5 Year Research Investment into Policing Futures and explorations of:
 - “How are vulnerabilities produced, compounded and mitigated by policing and how best can the police and other services be harnessed to prevent and reduce vulnerabilities?”
 - 6 Major projects:
 - County Lines
 - Online Child Sexual Victimization
 - Mental Illness
 - Domestic Abuse
 - Homelessness
 - Modern Slavery
- Based on the principles of:
 - Co-production and partnership
 - Conceptual/cross-cutting development of ‘vulnerability’
 - Place-based approaches



**Vulnerability &
Policing Futures**
Research Centre

This is not a study for the police.

There is co-production and ‘buy-in’ by the police but the research is for those understood and recognised as vulnerable and exploited/abused and about helping produce appropriate approaches to the policing of vulnerabilities.

The research is independent. The police cannot unduly influence it or prevent its findings being published. When we talk to vulnerable people we do so independently of the police and all information is confidential. The police understand this.

County Lines Vulnerability Project – Primary Aims

- Map ‘presence’ of and (changing) ‘shape’ of County Lines nationally/locally
- Map local/national policing vulnerability structures in relation to CL and operationalisation across the UK (e.g. Child Centred Policing Teams)
- Map and critically explore the conceptualisation, operationalisation and acceptability of ‘vulnerability’ by police, NGOs, CJS, people with lived experience
- Explore current limitations of policing vulnerability in relation to CL
- Explore ‘best practice’ or ‘promising practice’ in policing CL related vulnerability
- Implement pilot project(s) embedding acceptable definitions of vulnerability and promising practices for evaluation of efficacy

The Project – in Essence

Phase 1 (year one): First all UK force/s survey on CL and how it is being approached.

- Survey of each of the 45 (England/Northern Ireland/Scotland/Wales) police forces to understand the how CL is affecting those force areas/regions.
- How forces (and partners) are approaching the policing of CL and – most importantly – are approaching the policing and support of vulnerable/exploited young people/others.
- To explore (initially) from a police perspective ‘what works’/what specific challenges they identify. To understand how police are responding to vulnerability nationwide.

Phase 2: Identification of and Rapid Appraisals of x4 key areas of ‘best practice’ or priority interest

- Research team ‘parachuting’ in to specific locations to undertake intense research on those areas to gain...
- In-depth familiarisation of issues raised in the survey; depth familiarisation of the barriers and facilitators of effective policing and support of vulnerable/exploited CL involved people
- *Co-production* with: People With Lived Experience (‘victims’); NGOs/charities; Police; Youth Justice etc.

Phase 3*: (post project aims) An implementation and evaluation phase of a ‘best practice’ case study.

- *Currently unfunded

The Future of Policing...?

Developments in policing already taking place in various countries is arguably an indicator of the evolution/trajectory of (non-military forms) of policing ?

Vulnerabilities as something needing a more considered policing response will be increasingly recognised in the majority of countries around the world (over time)?

Policing will need help transitioning from an enforcement orientated culture and approach to one where they are part of a multi-agency support system

Police will often be first-responders (whether they like it or not) and as such there is little room to continue as they historically have done