



County Lines and the Threat to Children and Youth

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Jesus instructs His Disciples in Matthew 19.14 - "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." What does this mean? The

Expanded Bible interprets it this way: "Let the little children come to me. Don't stop [hinder] them, because the kingdom of heaven belongs to people who are like these children [meaning humble and dependent]." Jesus recognises that children are vulnerable and in need of love and protection, as there are people who seek their harm, it should come as no surprise that some of Jesus' harshest words refer to such people (Luke 17.2).

County Lines stands as such a threat to the wellbeing of children and youth. The National Crime Agency (NCA) states: 'County Lines is where illegal drugs are transported from one area to another... usually by children or vulnerable people who are coerced into it by gangs. The 'County Line' is the mobile phone line used to take the orders of drugs.'¹ Children and young people are persuaded, or forced to 'store drugs and money or transport them to suburban areas, market towns and coastal towns (Home Office, 2018)² 'Teenagers are often' used 'to carry illegal substances by train as part of so-called county lines networks'³, with 'over 2000 lines operating across the UK'.⁴

Various strategies are used to entice children and youth: adverts on Instagram and Snapchat⁵ with messages 'by drug dealers asking "who wants to make £500 this weekend?"'⁶ Freebies 'vapes' 'bicycles, sweets, magazines' 'free sandwiches,' also 'through online gaming platforms'.⁷ Recruits are offered 'cash, mobile phones' 'clothes to take advantage of so-called "business opportunities"'.⁸ Gangs often target children 'with mental health or addiction problems' with a 'disproportionate impact on socially excluded young people and on the communities in which new drug supply networks develop'.⁹ These children are often 'exposed to physical, mental and sexual abuse, and in some instances will be trafficked to areas a long way from home as part of the network's drug dealing business'.¹⁰



It is a tragedy that any child should suffer abuse in this way, but the reality is that children within the Church and affiliates are also suffering, often imperceptibly.

Case Study: A Mother's reflection on how County Lines impacted her son and family:

This is 'a reflective account of my son's journey, who has additional needs and that of my family. A journey of pain distress and turmoil, I feel vulnerable, but I write this for the benefit of others, a young person, a parent, to open your eyes. Like any Mother you want to love and protect your children and that never stops. My son, a talented swimmer competed in the Yorkshire championships and was advancing to the next level. He was a keen footballer; remarkably intelligent securing 8 GCSE grade C and above without revision; life was good.

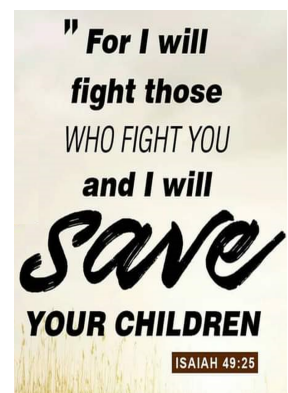
My family became part of the Adventist Church when my children were young, they enjoyed the spiritual and the social aspects of church. However, my son began to distance himself from Church in his early teens and the nightmare began at 17. He no longer wanted to swim, started missing college lectures and hanging around with a friend from primary school, also a swimmer, but had stopped before my son. My son was drawn into what he thought was exciting times, socialising with young people who were not known to myself and could be seen as, for want of a better word, undesirable characters. My son's background and upbringing was so different to his new associates, he was unable to see where all this was leading, but I certainly could.



The 'missing' episodes started. My daughter would burst into the bedroom concerned for her brother, informing myself and her father that he was not in the house. I would run frantically in his room, only to find an empty bed and the window open. I searched the streets until the early hours. Night after night our torment would continue. The sleepless nights were countless. I would go to church exhausted; my son's behaviour changed overnight. I eventually turned to external services for help, because as a family we felt helpless and it was at that point I was told they had a photo of my son on their walls as being at a potential risk of harm (towards him) as he was known to be part of a gang. The reality hit home. I was losing my son. I prayed so hard often with tears for his safety. Our whole family would fear when there was a knock at the door, thinking it was bad news. My faith gave me the strength to carry on, I put everything in God's hands.

I never forget the day both my husband and I received the phone call which we dreaded, we were asked to go to the hospital as fast as we could as our son had been beaten up badly and this wasn't the first time, but it was the worst. He came back to church for one day after the incident, I was so relieved. However, it was just for a day, as his friends that he once had within the church in his words, 'ignored him'. He felt lost within the church and totally disconnected. A place which was once so familiar to him, became unfamiliar. He walked out the doors that very same day, my calls to him were lost and all I remember is a dark car outside church and him getting into it. I felt hopeless and disheartened. Would this ever end? The welcome we give in church is so important, as that could have been our turning point.

To cut a long story short, my son is doing really well today, he works full-time and makes music, sharing his life stories. I do not know the full extent of the life my son used to live as he remains silent about it. With regards to some of his so-called associates, I understand some served time in prison. I will always maintain that he was different from those associates. He knew what was right and wrong and managed to remove himself from many situations. He was educated, he managed to complete his BTEC Extended level 3 in sport and had a church foundation. He has completely severed that part of his life and although he isn't in church, I thank God that he is alive and pray that one day he will return. Looking back things could have been so different, we have been on such a journey. As parents, look for the signs, be vigilant - missing episodes, new associates/ friends, change in personality and language, change of style of certain clothing, distancing themselves from family, disconnection. Remember to make everyone feel welcome when they walk through the church doors regardless of whether they have been absent for a while. You never know what they are going through. Remember most of all God is our strength and our defence (Exodus 15:1-4).



Appeal

For families suffering in silence, we appeal to you to break the silence. The NEC Children's Ministries Department is here to provide you with support, we are committed to exposing County Lines and providing you with practical steps, in confronting this form of abuse. As stated by Dawn, know that God is with you. Please share your thoughts and experiences and look out for further articles. We thank Dawn, by God grace, for opening our eyes.

References

1. ¹⁰National Crime Agency, 'County Lines' [Online]. Available at <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/drug-trafficking/county-lines>
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- 3, 6, ⁸ITV News, (2023) 'Drug dealers targeting boys as young as 13 to work in gangs'. March 1. [Online]. Available at <https://www.itv.com/news/central/2023-03-01/drug-dealers-targeting-boys-as-young-as-13-to-work-in-gangs>
- 4Crimestoppers, 'County Lines' [Online]. Available at <https://crimestoppers-uk.org/fearless/more-info/crime-types-explained/county-lines>
- 5, ⁷Taylor, D. (2023) 'Professional adverts' for county lines ensnaring children on Instagram and Snapchat' The Guardian, Feb 28. [Online]. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/feb/28/county-lines-grooming-looks-like-professional-job-ads-on-social-media>
- ⁸Andell, Paul, 2019, 'Theory into practice: County Lines, violence and changes to drug markets'. Youth & Policy. [Online]. Available at, <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/county-lines-violence-drug-markets/>
- ¹¹ITV News, (2023) 'Weapons, drugs and cash seized as 14 jailed in county lines drug operation' March 1. [Online]. Available at <https://www.itv.com/news/westcountry/2023-03-01/14-jailed-in-exeter-as-part-of-county-lines-drug-crackdown>

County lines gangs use children and vulnerable people to courier drugs and money. A young person who is involved in county lines activity might exhibit some of these signs:

 <p>Persistently going missing from school or home, or being found out-of-area</p>	 <p>Unexplained acquisition of money, clothes or mobile phones</p>	 <p>excessive receipt of texts or phone calls</p>	 <p>Relationships with controlling, older individuals or gang association</p>	 <p>Leaving home or care without explanation</p>
 <p>Suspicion of self-harm, physical assault or unexplained injuries</p>	 <p>Parental concerns</p>	 <p>Significant decline in school performance</p>	 <p>Significant changes in emotional well-being</p>	