

Social Media and County Lines.

A briefing on how organised crime groups use social media to groom and exploit young people.

There is information that “one in four young people (24%) reported that they see illicit drugs advertised for sale on social media – a significant figure considering how recent a phenomenon this is.”

- Most common social media platforms used to advertise drugs are Snapchat 56%, Instagram 55% and Facebook 47%.
- Most drugs are available with adverts viewed being Cannabis 63%, Cocaine 26%, MDMA/Ecstasy 24%, Xanax 20%, Nitrous Oxide 17% and Codeine/Lean 16%.

In The Children’s Society report “Counting Lives: Responding to Children Who Are Criminally Exploited” (July 2019) Practitioners mention young people are approached through social media platforms to initially engage in County Lines models of exploitation. During Covid-19 restrictions, young people are spending more time online. There has been a national increase in perpetrators grooming young people online via social media and online gaming sites for both sexual and criminal exploitation.

Online Grooming is the act of developing a relationship with a child to enable their abuse and exploitation both online and offline. Online platforms, such as online gaming, social media, messaging and live streaming, can be used to do this.

There are many risks facing young people online to be aware of. Anyone can adopt any identity, young people can be manipulated to share information or images online, constant contact means there is no escape for young people from their exploiter.



Social Media and How It Can Be Used within the County Lines context.

- Largely media audiences are grown through developing a customer base and encouraging young people or customers to share. Often “customers” are sharing on their stories positive reviews, referral deals, new products.
- Dealers can share “stories” to their followers but depending on the app, information can be shared through geographical location.
- Advertising occurs through sharing photos, videos or statuses showing money, new drugs or when they are open for “business”. Use of hashtags on platforms such as Instagram mean that individuals can search for specific terms linked to drug use and can find an account to purchase from in minutes. Outright searches for drugs are banned, however users can still search slang that will go undetected by Instagram.
- Emojis are also used to mask and hide language that is linked to drugs, violence and sexual activity online. Examples for selling drugs may be ❄️ (buying “Snow”) 🍷 (buying an 8th) or 🚀 (purity of drugs).
- After finding an advert, buyers can then contact dealers directly by commenting on their post or by using encrypted messaging services. Exchanges can then happen in person or through postal delivery.
- The design features on Social Media Platforms enables dealers to expand their network and professionalise their “business”. Functions like ‘suggested friends’ means that there is an element of trust through acquaintance and young people are more likely to accept requests with mutual friends.
- End to end encryption on many platforms means that only the individuals sending and receiving communication can see this. Some social media platforms also have time limits on when a message can be viewed making it more difficult to be able to capture evidence.

How can Parents, Carers or Professionals use Social Media to protect their child?

- If a young person is linked to online criminal activity, some essential information to evidence:
 - Username
 - App being used
 - QR code/barcode (Snapchat, this can be found by clicking the account detail in the top left corner of the home screen.)
 - Evidence of content that is concerning. This can be through a screenshot or taking an image from a different device. Screenshots on some apps like Snapchat and Instagram alerts the original poster that a screenshot has been taken and this can put someone at risk of further harm.
- Some apps have functions that mean that messages or images shared are only visible for a small period of time or are only able to be opened once. The best way to record this is through taking a photograph of it from another device.
- Seek immediate advice from the local police, who have access to specialist resources to ensure that the evidence is recovered to allow for children to be safeguarded.

Further Information and Support.

- **The National Crime Agency County Lines** Website explain more about County Lines and indicators of exploitation in your area. [National Crime Agency County Lines Information](#)
- **Safe 4 Me** has details about support services nationally for young people impacted by Child Criminal and Sexual Exploitation. They also have lots of information regarding specific forms of exploitation, understanding trauma, rights and the law and much more. [Safe 4 Me Support Services Information](#)
- **The Safeguarding Network** have helpful tips for understanding indicators of exploitation and what may make a young person more vulnerable to being exploited. [The Safeguarding Network Resources](#)
- **The NSPCC** offer guidance on understanding specific apps and platforms that young people may be using on their [Net-Aware](#) website.