THE LOST BOYS

Inner-city gangs are trafficking vulnerable children to sell drugs in towns and villages across Britain — a practice known as "county lines". Why are their victims being criminalised? *Katie Glass* reports

I used to worry about his education and what he'd want to be when he grew up. Now I worry he could end up dead." Sarah looks down at her hands clasped tight on her lap and starts to cry. "I don't know what it's like to have a son pass away, but that's how it feels — that sense of loss."

Theirs had been a "calm, loving family". Sarah and her son, James, had always been close. Her family doted on him. "Spoilt rotten," Sarah says, remembering how "every weekend, without fail, we'd get together as a family for dinner and he'd be doing a little performance". They had a good life in London. Sarah worked in the City. Sometimes James would join her at her office, playing on the spare computer, legs swinging under the desk. They took holidays at their second home in Spain and did things together every weekend. But when James started secondary school, things changed dramatically.

Well-mannered, bright and popular, it was in sports that James shone. He represented the school in rugby, basketball and football. In hindsight, Sarah wonders if her first warning should have been how out-of-character it was when, one week, James refused to go to practice. He just didn't feel up to it, he told his mother, who reassured his coaches he would be back next week. Then he refused to go again. "Initially, I thought maybe he was doing too much, with training in the week and matches on weekends. I thought perhaps he needed a break."

Then James started coming home late. "Really late for a 14-year-old — 8pm, 9pm, then, on a few occasions, after midnight," says Sarah. He'd make excuses →

— claim practice had overrun, or he had been with mates. "He was getting older and I assumed it was the usual teenage stuff of wanting to hang out with friends. I got upset with him, but that only seemed to escalate the situation." James started disappearing overnight, then for weeks at a time, returning dirty, dishevelled and anxious. He refused to say where he'd been. His mother tried "everything". She grounded him, confiscated his mobile, questioned him: where was he going? Who was he with?

"Nothing worked — he would go out anyway," says Sarah, explaining that, by then, James's behaviour had drastically changed. "He would spit in my face and call me names. It's so hard to expect anyone to imagine it. What I didn't know then was that normal parental boundaries wouldn't work, because he was under duress."

One day when James was 15 he jumped out of a window at their home and disappeared for three months. Frantic, Sarah searched his bedroom, finding a train ticket to Norfolk. Not long afterwards, she heard that James had been spotted at a mainline station. Sarah reported her son missing to the police, but it would be months before she learnt the truth.

James had become a victim of an alarming and underreported form of modern-day slavery affecting British teenagers. Police and local authorities call it "county lines". It involves young people being recruited by inner-city gangs, put in cars or on trains, and trafficked hundreds of miles away from their home to seaside towns and small villages. Once there, they are given a mobile phone through which to sell drugs, usually crack and heroin. By running these telephone lines in different counties, city gangs have expanded their operations outside the saturated markets into new territories.

The National Crime Agency (NCA) estimates that a gang can make an average of £2,000 a day from one of these lines. It seems unsurprising, then, that the phenomenon is increasing and rural areas are seeing a rise in drug and knife crime. A recent NCA report found that 85% of police forces across England and Wales are dealing with county lines, and 80% of cases involved children.

The young people involved call it "going country", "cunch" (slang for "country") or "OT" ("out there"). "There's London and then there's 'out there'," one young man who had become involved in county lines told me. On YouTube, grime MCs rap about going country. On social media, under the hashtag #cunch, teenagers glamorise the lifestyle, posting videos of themselves showing off designer clothes, trainers and wodges of cash. But this is a front, used to attract young people, and hides a darker story: of vulnerable teenagers being exploited by criminal gangs, lured by relationships they consider friendships, given gifts or invited to parties, then manipulated with threats of violence and sexual abuse into a life of crime.

I first heard about county lines from a social worker, who told me of a parent in the capital finding their child with six train tickets to Scotland. Another London child was picked up in Aberdeen. One girl was sent to the Midlands in an Uber; it's believed she was made to carry a weapon.

Authorities liken county lines to the trafficking of foreign workers into forced labour in Britain — although, in this case, children are trafficked *across* Britain. Most are in their mid-teens, but some are as young as eight. The phenomenon has parallels with the cases of child sexual exploitation in Rotherham, where authorities turned a blind eye to the serial abuse of vulnerable teenage girls. In county lines, gangs are well aware that the disappearance of "difficult" teenagers can be a low priority for the police.

Now, as county lines become more widespread, middle-class children are also being targeted. Gangs call them "clean skins". They know that a schoolgirl in a smart uniform is unlikely to be stopped by police as she boards a train to a rural county carrying a duffle bag stuffed with drugs.

One youth worker told me about a 15-year-old girl from an academic north London family who disappeared overnight and was found at a train station the next morning. "I immediately suspected county lines," she said. "I worry that middle-class parents are missing the ball on this."

> One youth worker said: "I worry that middle-class parents are missing the ball on county lines"

For some teenagers, their introduction to county lines starts on social media. Others are offered mobile phones, trainers or cash. Joe is now in his twenties, but he got involved as a teenager. It was his schoolfriend Tom who initially suggested "going country". They were 14 and had never left home, but Tom's older brother offered to drive them to Colchester and let them stay there in a low-rise block overlooking suburban houses.

"The first time felt lovely," Joe says. "We had a big pizza. It was calm." Compared with the east London estate where he had grown up, Essex felt safe.

Joe's job was simple: when he got the call on his county line, he had to run down the stairs to the car park and hand over drugs to customers. For two days' work he'd be paid £200. It seemed a fortune. "We were both young," he says. "I was with my boy, smoking, chatting. You sleep, you go on your phone. I suddenly had money in my pocket."

With his cheeky manner and wide grin, it's easy to picture Joe as the optimistic 14-year-old he was then. It was just "easy money", he says. Then he reconsiders: "They make it look easy."

Overall, Joe estimates he "went country" more than 50 times, making different excuses to his parents each time. Where did he go? "Anywhere in the UK: wherever the money is." He went to "small towns, villages", some near Oxford, others past Manchester. The NCA has found county lines operating in two distinct areas: deprived seaside towns — Clacton, Margate — and "middle-class" areas with good transport links to London, in Somerset, Oxford, Devon and Cornwall. "If you live there," Joe says, "you'd never guess it was going on."

Joe's first trip was cushy. The next time, he was expected to go for a week, and alone. The houses he was sent to were rarely as nice as that first flat in Colchester. Often, gangs establish drug-running houses by taking over vulnerable people's homes — the police call this "cuckooing". In one case, a man with learning disabilities whose home was taken over by a gang was found hiding in his bedroom after a week. Others escape and are made homeless. Joe stayed mainly in "[drug] users' houses. All they think about is drugs; they don't wash or clean up. You could smell the houses before they opened the door. There were dogs, dirty clothes. There's no nice furniture. They sleep on the floor."

He found himself living with crack addicts, who would "do anything — they'll come at you with a needle, punch you". Joe was 17 when he watched his friend have his teeth knocked out by three addicts who attacked him.

Social workers told me about children coming home after weeks on county lines, unwashed; they hadn't been given food or clean clothes. Anything the gang gives them must be earned. Gangs put young people into debt-bondage, forcing them to work to pay the money back.

"They make you fail just so you have to stay out there," Joe says. Gangs stage robberies, or tip off police, then tell the young person they are in debt for any drugs or money lost. "Anything that happens out there is your responsibility," Joe says.

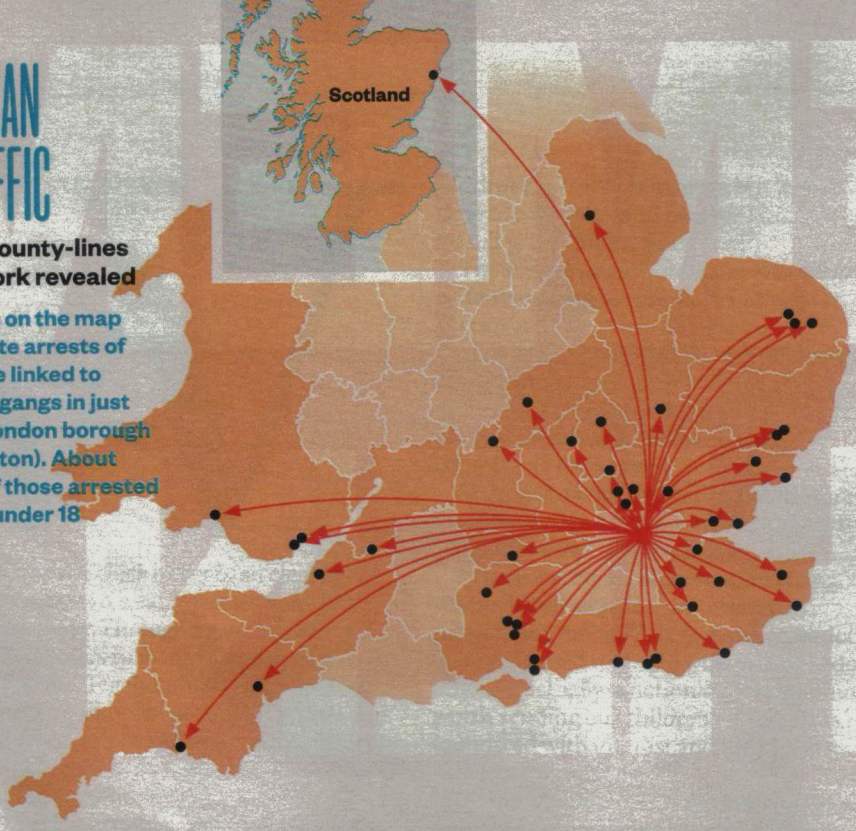
Joe was given only one-way train tickets. He didn't have money to buy a return or know how to get back to London. He was a teenager who had rarely left the city before.

"When you're out there, you're stranded," he says. "You want to go home, but it's not so simple. You have no control." Some gangs monitor kids' whereabouts by forcing them to check in on live-streaming apps such as Facebook Live or Snapchat —

HUMAN TRAFFIC

The county-lines network revealed

Points on the map indicate arrests of people linked to drugs gangs in just one London borough (Islington). About half of those arrested were under 18



the latter's SnapMap feature shows your location. I ask Joe if he was scared to leave. He shrugs. He knew the people he worked for had knives and guns, and used boiling water, acid and beatings as punishments.

In Nottingham, kids running county lines spoke of punishment beatings so regular they became "just business". Often, girls who go on county-lines trips find themselves coerced into sexual acts, which are filmed and used to blackmail them and stop them going home.

I speak to another boy, Charlie, who tells me he first agreed to "go country" for the money. He was 15 when a friend of his sister invited him to Reading. The suggestion was casual. An adventure. He was given a phone and told that whenever it rang, he should "just go to the shop and give it to them". He knew the "it" was drugs, but he didn't consider the implications. He was excited to make money — more than his friends could earn in a month. Charlie is lean and muscular, with a shaved head. From a single-parent family, he was 13 when his mother's business fell apart and their home was repossessed. For years, his mum worked any job she could to keep them afloat. "She always tried to keep the lights and gas on in the house and make sure I didn't go without food."

As a 13-year-old boy, Charlie felt it was his job to step up. By that age, he says, "you're a man". On the estate in west London where Charlie lived with his mum, he was used to violence on the streets. He witnessed drug deals walking to school, where the dealer "gets into a BMW. Your mum and dad don't drive a BMW, but there's a guy half their age doing it, in the flashiest clothes. You think, 'I need to be around him.'"

For Charlie, county lines was a way to earn money, but also an escape from the bleaker side of life in the capital, the grassy patches between high-rises, the fried-chicken shops. "You always want to be in a nice place, don't you? So if someone offers to take you, you want to go. I didn't see what I was really getting myself into — you don't understand the consequences."

Sarah, James's mum, sits in my office. It is too dangerous to meet at her home or in public in case someone sees us. Her son is now in his early twenties and has been in a gang for five years. She is scared for her son, and her whole family's safety.

"By the time I found out what he was doing, it was too late — he was already too deeply involved in the gang," she says, and she starts crying again. "They're being brainwashed: you don't tell family, you don't tell friends. Everything they do has consequences: they could be injured or there are threats their family could be hurt."

James has been stabbed twice. Sarah believes the first time was a warning. The second time was so severe, he almost died.

When James first started disappearing, Sarah reported him missing to the police, repeatedly, sometimes 30 times a week.

> "If someone offers to take you to a nice place, you want to go. I didn't see what I was getting into"

"I was screaming, begging, crying for help." They said he was "probably with his mates", and that his criminal activity would have to be "really bad" before they would step in. She tried different agencies — social workers, key workers, his school. None considered it a safeguarding issue.

At 17, James was arrested selling drugs on a county line and sent to a young-offender institution. Sarah was devastated. "The police and the courts, they didn't see he was being exploited at all," she says. "Nothing was put in place to protect him."

Didn't he know what he was doing? "Yes, they probably do know, but they don't know the risks, the violence and how vulnerable and exposed they'll become."

Claire Hubberstey, of Safer London, a charity working with vulnerable young people, believes we need an urgent change in perspective. "This is child exploitation," she says. "A cultural shift needs to take place, so we start seeing young people on county lines as victims." She tells me about a 15-year-old girl who disappeared for 10 days. Police found her in a small coastal town with a 26-year-old man who has a history of sexual violence. Five thousand pounds' worth of crack cocaine was found secreted inside her vagina. She was charged with possession with intent to supply.

Aika Stephenson, a solicitor and youth-justice expert, has represented a number of young people facing sentences for actions committed while trafficked through county lines. In some cases, she says, "there is clearly a safeguarding issue. A girl found with an older man miles from home — that should be ringing alarm bells for the police. There doesn't seem to be any consideration of the fact they may be trafficked."

She tells me about one 14-year-old boy she represented. He was befriended by a group of older men who plied him with alcohol and cannabis, and bought him gifts — "grooming, essentially". Then they demanded he pay them back £1,000. In order to pay the debt, they drove him to a house in the home counties and made him sell drugs. Housed with crack addicts, the boy was so scared, he slept with a knife in his bed. The police arrested him and charged him with possession with intent to supply and possession of a knife. He was found guilty in court, "pigeonholing him for the rest of his life as an offender".

The Home Office told me it is committed to tackling county lines by shutting down phone lines used by gangs. It also agreed that children "groomed to sell drugs by criminal gangs have been exploited", adding that it is working "to raise awareness of county lines and ensure that young people are safeguarded and receive help and support". I asked what policies it was introducing to stop the criminalisation of children. It declined to comment ■

Some names and geographical details have been changed