



# County Lines

## Strategic Threat Risk Assessment

April 2023 to March 2024  
Financial Year

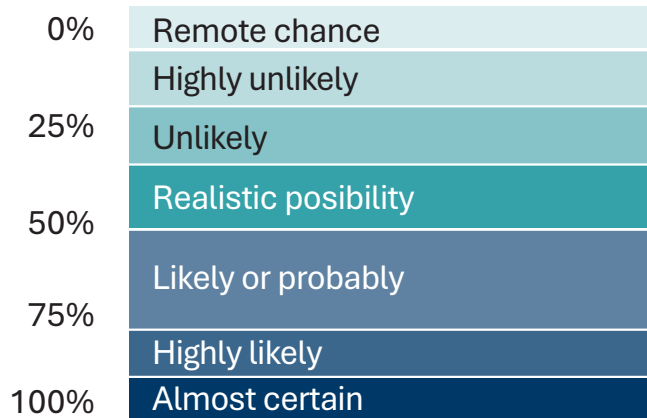




# National County Lines Coordination Centre

## Methodology

Throughout this paper, language of probability is used, which is defined by the Professional Head of Intelligence Assessment (PHIA) 'Probability Yardstick'. The probability ranges for such terms are as follows:



## Confidence Levels

Confidence levels are attributed to convey the quality of the evidence used, and are described as follows:

### High Confidence

Good quality and/or corroborated from a range of different sources, or situations where it is possible to make a clear judgement.

### Moderate Confidence

Open to various interpretations, or credible and plausible but lacks corroboration.

### Low Confidence

Scant or very fragmented, and/or based on sources of suspect reliability.

## Data Framework

The period of the Strategic Threat Risk Assessment (STRA) is April 2023 to March 2024.

Drug lines are identified by unique telephone number and exclude generic lines (unless otherwise stated).

The line has been created within the STRA time period or has had person(s) linked to the line within the STRA period indicating the line is current.

Individuals are counted where the date of birth (DOB) and both forename and surname are present with no obvious errors, for example shown as born 01/01/1900 or name field starts with \*alias\*

Age of individuals is calculated from the point at which they are first linked to County Lines behaviours or lines.

Drug line data is sourced from the Police National Database (PND) and the activity of the four Taskforces (Met, GMP, WMP and Merseyside).

Demographic data includes PND and Police National Computer (PNC) data as they are consistently recorded by all forces.

## Data Limitations

County Lines (CL) drug dealing remains a theme rather than a specific crime type. The principal data source for collection is the PND system, which relies on manual data entry. The identification of individuals affected by CL also requires flagging, again a manual process. There are inherent data accuracy issues with such processes.

Improving the quality of data collection is a priority for policing and the Home Office.

Since 2018, the National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCLCC) has produced data on the CL recorded scale and threat using PND data. For this STRA NCLCC have also included additional data sources, including PNC data, which has enhanced our understanding of the threat picture. Some information such as harm markers/indicators, roles and Organised Crime Group (OCG) data is only held on PND.

# Contents

<b>Foreword</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Key Judgements</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Nature &amp; Scale of Threat</b> .....	<b>12</b>
County Lines Business Model .....	12
Drug Lines .....	14
County Lines Gangs .....	17
<b>Vulnerability &amp; Exploitation</b> .....	<b>18</b>
Children & Adults.....	18
Missing from Home.....	24
Cuckooing.....	26
<b>Drugs</b> .....	<b>27</b>
Commodity .....	27
Drugs Trafficking & Demand .....	28
Drug-Related Death.....	28
Social Media Drug Lines .....	29
<b>Violence</b> .....	<b>30</b>
Harm Analysis.....	30
Prisons .....	30
<b>Emerging trends</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>Intelligence Gaps</b> .....	<b>32</b>
<b>Glossary</b> .....	<b>33</b>
<b>Appendix</b> .....	<b>35</b>
Data Table .....	35
Demographic Charts.....	36



# Foreword



As the National Police Chiefs Councils (NPCC) lead for County Lines, I am delighted to introduce our Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment for the last financial year.

County Lines criminality targets the vulnerable and devastates communities as a whole, driving antisocial behaviour and violence. The perpetrators distance themselves from the activity by manipulating others, often through violence, and exploiting our most vulnerable members of society, who then take the risk for others' financial gain.

I am proud of the work achieved to tackle these harms, particularly through the County Lines Programme, identifying and disrupting lines and criminal gangs committing the most harm in England and Wales. We have developed safeguarding strategies and provided support and learning to law enforcement and partners, improving the overall policing response. However, as can be seen from this assessment we cannot be complacent. These criminals adapt their model in response to police and partner activity and we must remain alive to this as we seek to continue to disrupt and dismantle County Lines networks.

To continue the momentum this year, the new national County Lines policing strategy for 2024–27 has been launched, setting out our vision and a 4P (Prevent, Protect, Prepare, Pursue) framework that builds on the work done since 2018. Our strategy supports HM Government's safer streets mission, shifting focus from numbers of drug lines closed, to preventing harm, protecting children and vulnerable adults, and pursuing high-harm County Lines gangs. By working more closely with neighbourhood teams, we can help reduce antisocial behaviour linked to drugs supply whilst simultaneously pursuing violent drug dealers, using modern technology and streamlined investigative methods.

I hope you find our strategic threat assessment informative and useful, as we better understand how County Lines have evolved, with the emergence of the supply of powerful and dangerous synthetic opioids and a more localised business model. This document will be reviewed and updated annually.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Brogden". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Paul Brogden**  
**Commander Metropolitan Police Service**  
National Police Chiefs' Council lead for County Lines and Gangs

# Executive Summary

Over the last six years, the National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCLCC) have worked to improve understanding of the threat picture, capturing and analysing data input by forces and accessing a wider range of information. The dedicated analytical functionality within NCLCC is providing a greater understanding of the threat, along with how it is changing.

The County Lines threat remains stable, following intensive policing activity, focussed on tackling County Lines from the four exporter cities of London, Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester and, on the rail network, alongside education and multi-agency intervention work with those at risk of or, being exploited. This is despite the overall threat from drugs increasing, as cocaine production remains high, pricing consistent with high profit margins, and nitazenes increasing the risk to users. Law enforcement activity has made the enterprise riskier for criminals.

This assessment highlights evidence of how the business model and the threat it presents has changed, becoming more localised. There is some evidence that this represents fewer harms, with all exporter force areas seeing a reduction in serious violence hospitalisations, including stabbings of under-25s. There are believed to be fewer children involved in County Lines now, after a reported reduction in police data, in contrast with higher numbers of adults involved and steady numbers of Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) and linked individuals identified.

Policing's ability to identify drug lines has improved, helping to drive an increase in the total number reported. There are fewer lines running externally from one force to another (e.g. from a big city to a more rural town), but many more internal lines reported (starting and ending within the same force area), representing a clear shift towards a more localised model of supply.

County Lines remain the predominant market for the supply of crack cocaine and heroin, enabled via mobile phones. Along with nitazenes, these class A drugs cause the most harm, including drug-related death.

Demographic data shows that County Lines are affecting the Black community disproportionately, who are over-represented as both offenders and victims (when compared with census data), and we must continue to do all we can to reduce and remove this disparity.

Despite the threat assessed as stable, with potentially fewer harms, there are still far too many children and vulnerable adults being exploited. The true number of children exploited is likely to be much higher than police data shows. Similarly, we must ensure that we understand fully what this more localised model means for how children, in particular, are exploited, and work to prevent that happening.

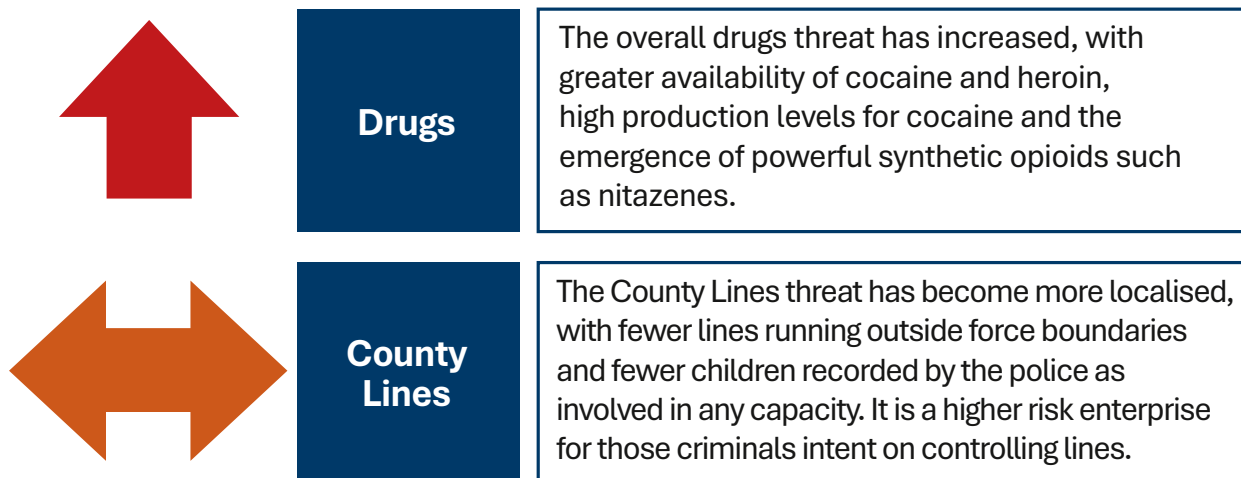


Gaps remain in the intelligence picture. We need to better understand how children are being groomed into County Lines and the role of women and girls, including how they may be exploited. Technology continues to advance, and encryption remains a challenge for law enforcement. To date, great successes have been achieved through the County Lines Programme with a data-led, unbiased, precise approach to identifying and closing drug lines. As the threat continues to evolve, the policing response needs to keep pace. We must continue to do all we can to prevent and disrupt County Lines.

This strategic threat risk assessment provides a detailed assessment of the threat picture for the financial year, April 2023 to March 2024, and aims to help inform and enable the policing response.



# Key Judgements



**KJ1** The County Lines threat is stable, evolving to become more localised, with fewer traditional drug lines crossing force boundaries, but more local lines.

**KJ2** This year, more adults and fewer children have been recorded by the police as having County Lines involvement, in any role (including victim or perpetrator).

**KJ3** The overall drugs threat has increased. Global production of cocaine is rising and heroin stocks are plentiful, meaning that the drugs are widely available, with wholesale prices dropping (in 2022). Potent synthetic opioids such as nitazenes have emerged and present a serious risk to health.

**KJ4** There are 1,447 Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) linked to County Lines this year, with the numbers of new OCGs and individuals linked remaining steady.

**KJ5** County Lines gangs continue to use burner or graft phones to sell crack cocaine and heroin. These remain the predominant drugs supplied, on lines affecting all regions across England, Scotland and Wales. They continue to exploit children as drug runners, and vulnerable adults by taking over their homes as drugs supply bases, in a practice known as cuckooing.

# Introduction

1. The National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCLCC) was set up in 2018 to develop the national intelligence picture of the complexity and scale of the threat, prioritise action against the most serious offenders and engage with partners across HM Government, including in Health, Welfare and Education, to tackle the wider issues.

## Home Office and NPCC Definition of a County Line:

2. “...a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of ‘deal line’. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.”

In practical terms, County Lines involves the supply of illegal drugs, predominantly crack cocaine and heroin, across towns or cities, within police and local authority areas, as well as exported from urban hubs, across county borders. The places they are taken to, are known as ‘importer areas’.

3. Drugs supply networks existed long before the County Lines model, however, this particular model was attributed as the cause of a rise in serious violence in the 2018 Serious Violence Strategy,<sup>1</sup> which announced the launch of NCLCC and a focus on early intervention alongside robust law enforcement. This was further reinforced by Dame Carol Black’s independent Review of Drugs in 2020, which also highlighted the unprecedented number of very young people drawn into the drugs trade.<sup>2</sup>
4. Tackling County Lines continues to be a strategic policing priority.<sup>3</sup>
5. This report provides an annual assessment of the current threat picture for County Lines, in the financial year **April 2023 to March 2024**.

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1 [Home Office – Serious Violence Strategy, April 2018](#)

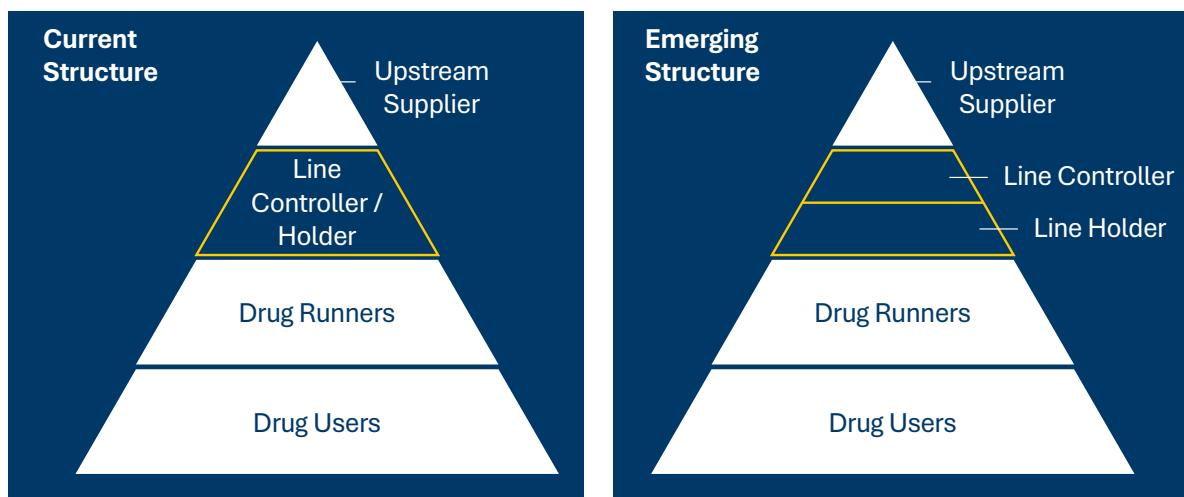
2 [Review of Drugs, Dame Carol Black, February 2020](#)

3 [Tackling County Lines remains a strategic policing priority \(npcc.police.uk\) November 2023](#)

# Nature & Scale of Threat

## County Lines Business Model

6. The County Lines Business Model is the supply of drugs at the retail end of the market, where violence and exploitation are an intrinsic part of the model. These lines affect the whole of the UK.
7. Drugs supply networks operate in a hierarchy, meeting demand from vulnerable drug users by supplying commodity obtained upstream via national and international drugs trafficking networks. County Lines gangs operate in the middle tier, and the Home Office-funded County Lines Programme aims to close drug lines and disrupt those line controllers operating at this specific level. This model is evolving after the last few years of proactive law enforcement activity. In some newer networks, the line controller sits above the holder of the line, which may be passed between individuals.



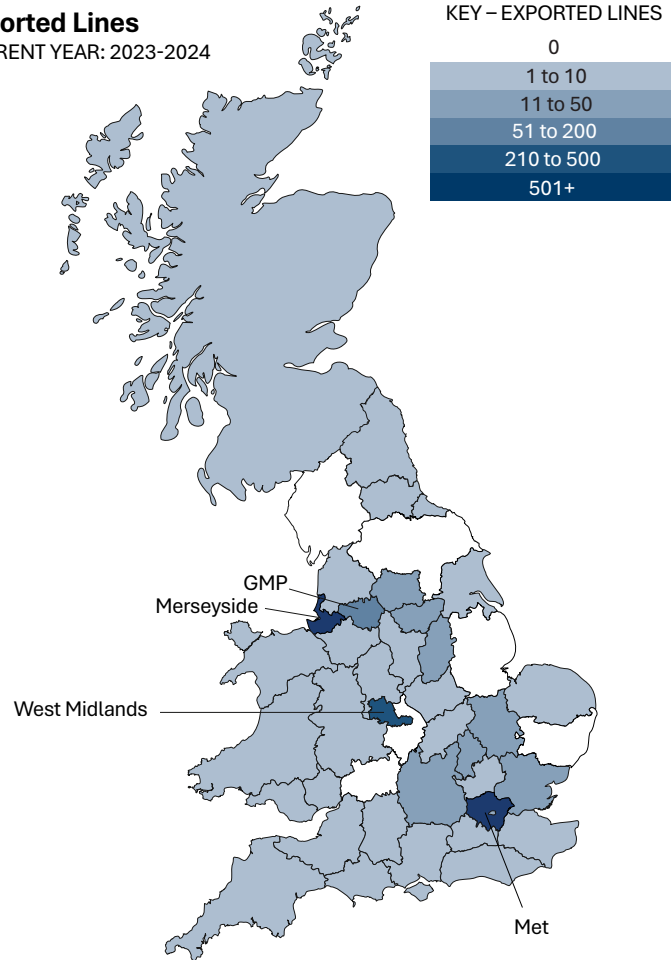
8. The County Lines Business Model involves child criminal exploitation, as well as child sexual exploitation. Children going missing are a fundamental feature. They are trafficked to work on drug lines at the sharp end, as drug runners transporting and selling drugs directly to users. This puts them in the most dangerous role within the supply chain, possessing valuable cash and commodity that other criminals may seek to steal, and with potential for violent conflict linked to the drugs operations, particularly over territory.
9. County Lines networks use multiple phones to conduct their business. Smartphones are used to communicate with others in the network, including directing those being exploited in workforce roles, via encrypted apps to seek to evade law enforcement. The deal line phone continues to be a simple 'burner or graft phone', generally only capable of calls/texts, and used to send bulk marketing messages offering drugs for sale to users, and only used as such.

10. The business model continues to evolve, with networks swift to take advantage of technological developments.
11. They continue to operate as many legitimate businesses would, using brand names to advertise their products, appeal to customers, build trust with their product, and ultimately grow market share. Marketing messages will often contain offers and deals to entice in customers. This year, the most used names were Ace, Jay, Max, T, Rico, Mitch and AJ. These names are consistently amongst the most popular in recent years, showing the value they place on using well-known branding.
12. Marketing messages are more commonly blank now, when previously they would promote two-for-one deals, again in reaction to significant law enforcement activity, which has forced criminals to change how they operate. Deal phones are still used, and regular customers understand this shift, contacting the (often branded) line phone in response to coded marketing messages. Drug runners are then instructed to make the deliveries to customers.
13. County Lines gangs continue to exploit both children and vulnerable adults to transport, store and supply drugs.

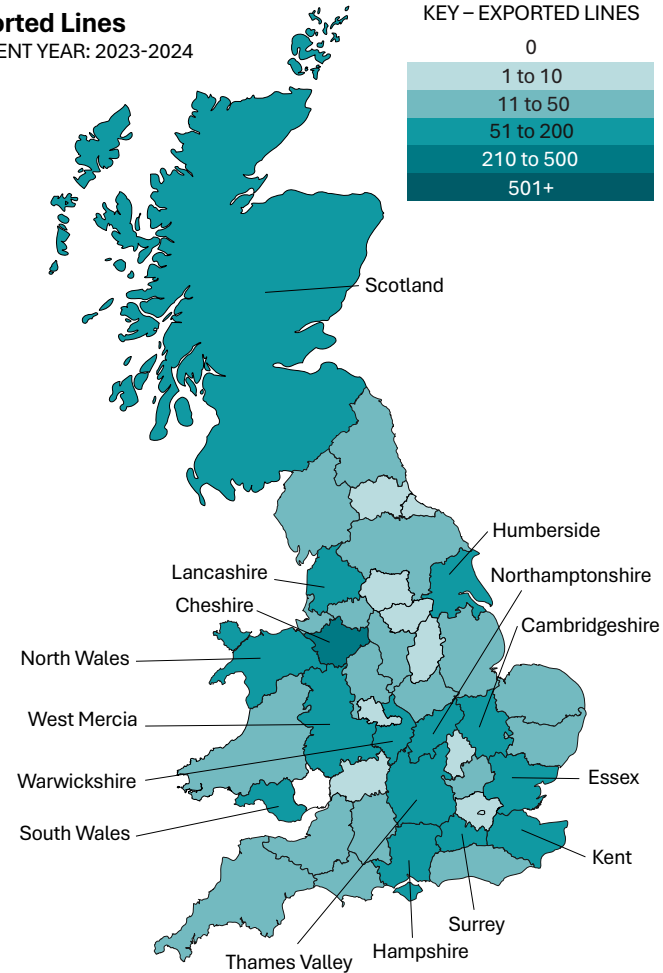
# Drug Lines

14. The majority of recorded lines continue to emanate from the main exporting areas of London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester, as can be seen in the left-hand map. Liverpool and London each have in excess of 501 lines recorded, and both Birmingham and Manchester have 210–500 lines recorded.

**Exported Lines**  
CURRENT YEAR: 2023-2024



**Imported Lines**  
CURRENT YEAR: 2023-2024



Forces that show as the exporter (map to the left) or importer (map to the right) of County Lines on PND between April 2023 and March 2024, where the start and end point of the line is known and where the line crosses a force boundary.

15. Cheshire, Scotland, Kent, Essex and Cambridgeshire were the top five importer forces this year. Importer forces located in the southeast were amongst those with the biggest reductions in County Lines affecting them, including Thames Valley, Hertfordshire, Surrey, Kent (despite a drop they are still in the top five importer areas), Sussex and Suffolk. Cheshire, Scotland and Cambridgeshire saw the biggest rises.
16. With high confidence, the County Lines Business Model is changing and becoming more localised. It is also riskier for offenders. This is attributed to the strong law enforcement focus on County Lines since 2018, particularly through activity funded by the County Lines Programme. Since it launched in 2019:<sup>†</sup>
- **5,627 County Lines have been closed**
  - **16,536 people have been arrested**
  - **8,817 individuals have been referred by police to safeguarding**

<sup>†</sup>Figures are correct as of 15 March 2024<sup>4</sup>

17. With continued improvements in recording practices and understanding, across policing, a higher number of lines (6,644) were recorded in the last year. Despite this recorded rise, the threat is considered stable.

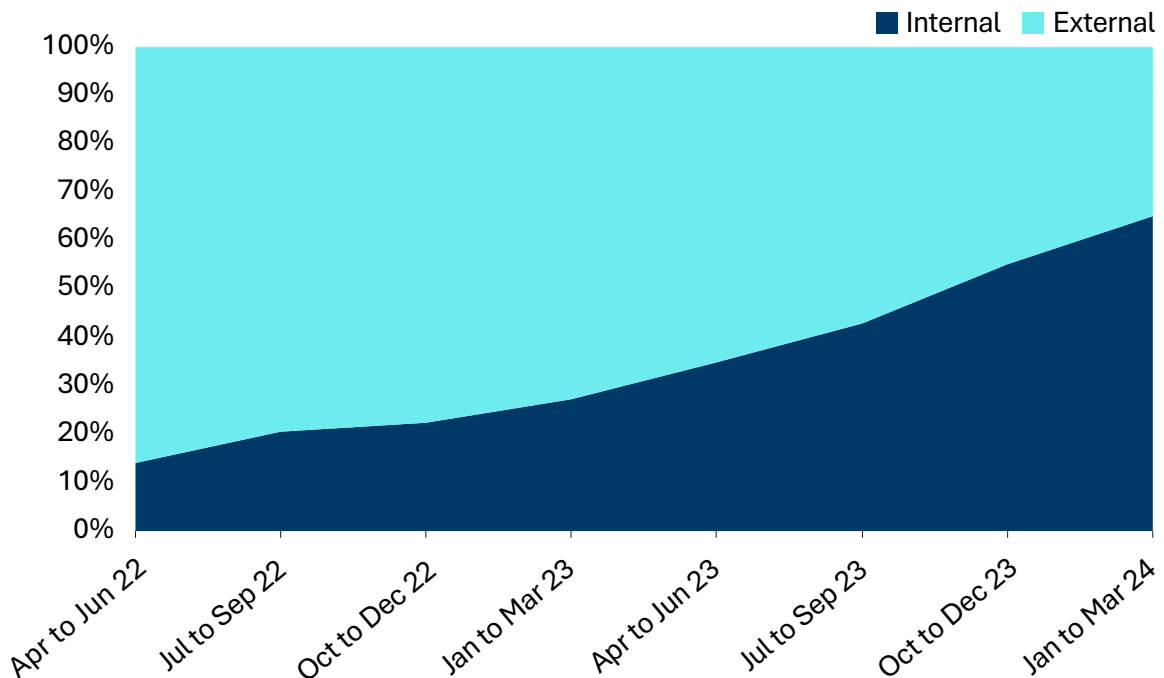
Year	Number of unique lines
2018–19*	3,464
2019–20*	4,002
2020–21*	3,679
2021–22*	4,201
2022–23	4,007
2023–24**	6,644

\*Previous reporting period ran for the year from November to October (due to timing of CL Programme commencement). Reporting period for this STRA has been revised and aligned to the financial year April to March (2022–23 and 2023–24).

\*\*This includes an additional 1,200 lines reported by exporter forces.

18. External lines (cross a force boundary) have reduced by 12.2%, whilst internal lines (start and end within a force boundary) have increased by 232%, year-on-year. Unknown lines (with no recorded start/end point) account for 28.5% of all lines this year, down from 30.5%. This represents the shift from a traditional County Lines Business Model to one that is more local.

**Increasing proportion of internal lines**



19. The graph shows how internal lines have increased rapidly in recent years, now making up the majority of reported lines. With moderate confidence, a sharp drop in lines reported as exported from London has driven most of the reduction in external lines.

20. With moderate confidence, it is likely that a more localised model will see children moving or trafficked over shorter distances, when being used or exploited as drug runners. However, the risk of serious harm to a child on a County Line and the threat from this type of drugs supply business model remains, and the shortened time missing or location found could affect policing judgement regarding County Lines involvement.

21. In Scotland, about 75% of line holders/controllers originate from the exporter police forces of Merseyside, Metropolitan and West Midlands.



# County Lines Gangs

22. County Lines gangs and networks mostly operate as Organised Crime Groups (OCGs), though we also see Urban Street Gangs (USGs) or sometimes individuals involved. USGs are highly fluid, territorial and involved in a range of criminality that affects local communities. County Lines gangs are those with strong links, shared interest in profiteering from drugs supply, involvement in the exploitation of children and vulnerable adults, and use violence.
23. 1,447 Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) have been linked to mapped individuals and County Lines this year. These groups are linked to 980 deal lines, the majority of which are County Lines, with a small number linked to social media lines. USGs are infrequently recorded as such, with their fluid nature making them very difficult to track accurately. There are 11 further street gangs linked to County Lines, which had no form of OCG reference.
24. Just under 1,300 County Lines nominals have been linked to OCGs this year, of which about 10% are mapped to two or more OCGs, showing some OCGs crossover. The groups share associates, professional enablers and companies, and collaborate with one another. As forces improve how they map their Serious and Organised Crime (SOC) threat, it is likely this crossover will increase.
25. The number of new OCGs and individuals linked to OCGs is steady this year, showing a distinct difference to the rise in numbers of lines and consistent with an assessment that the overall threat from County Lines remains stable.
26. OCGs operating in a County Lines context are overwhelmingly recorded as British at 91.3%. Other nationalities include Iraqi (0.8%), Pakistani (0.7%), Albanian (0.6%), Somali (0.6%), Romanian (0.3%), Portuguese (0.2%), Bermuda, Algerian, Jamaican, Slovakian, Polish, Vietnamese, Iranian, Afghan, Italian and no predominant nationality (all 0.1%).
27. Where recorded, County Lines OCGs drug activity is predominantly crack cocaine (68.0%) and cannabis supply (12.2%). Other types include heroin supply (6.3%), cocaine powder supply (3.9%), MDMA/ecstasy supply (1.4%), amphetamines (0.4%), and cutting agents (0.4%), albeit small amounts. Of note, heroin supply is much lower due to system constraints that only show a single primary drug type, meaning when crack cocaine and heroin are found together, only one can be recorded. It would otherwise be expected to be on par with crack cocaine at about 68%.

# Vulnerability & Exploitation

## Children & Adults

28. HM Government defines child criminal exploitation as follows:<sup>5</sup>

“Child criminal exploitation is common in County Lines and occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.”

29. Drugs gangs continue to use children, mostly boys aged 15–17 years, groomed with the promise of money and gifts and then exploited, forced or trapped into day-to-day drug dealing by debt bondage or threat of violence. They describe being trafficked to trap houses across the country, deprived of food, heat and any comforts, and being required to forego sleep to respond to orders 24/7.

30. Debt bondage remains a prevalent tactic, with children robbed (sometimes by the same line they are running on) and forced to work to pay off the debt. It is highly likely to continue, enabling control of drug runners and reducing costs. There are reports of one group trading debts, with the exploited victims then forced to work for the new network, with the debt increased.

31. Children are also being financially exploited, to launder the proceeds of organised crime. Criminals will approach children with offers, either locally or via social media and then use them, controlling their bank account to launder the proceeds of crime.

32. A key indicator of child exploitation on County Lines is missing from home.

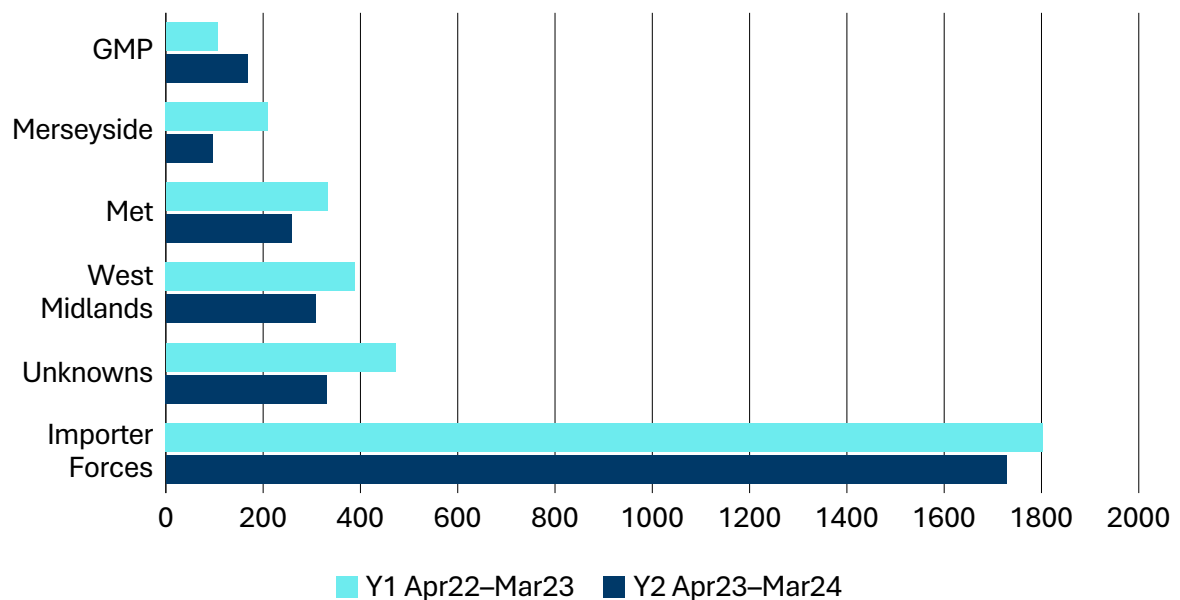
33. Although children from all types of backgrounds have been exploited, those at increased risk of exploitation into County Lines continue to be those known to County Lines gangs, or on the periphery of gangs. Factors increasing vulnerability to exploitation include living in areas of deprivation or poverty, experiencing parental substance misuse, having a mental disability, a looked-after status or being known to children’s services. Children excluded from school and going missing are at increased risk. County Lines gangs may use the financial pressures due to the rising cost of living to exploit children into drugs supply.

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5 [Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines - GOV.UK](#)

34. Child criminal exploitation on County Lines remains a significant risk. 2,888 (22% of total) children have been recorded as having County Lines involvement (victim or perpetrator) this year, down from 3,216 (26% of total) last year. This is a decrease of 10.2%, meaning that 328 fewer children are known to have been involved in County Lines. With moderate confidence, the numbers of children involved in County Lines has reduced this year, particularly in exporter force areas.

### All children by exporting and importing force areas

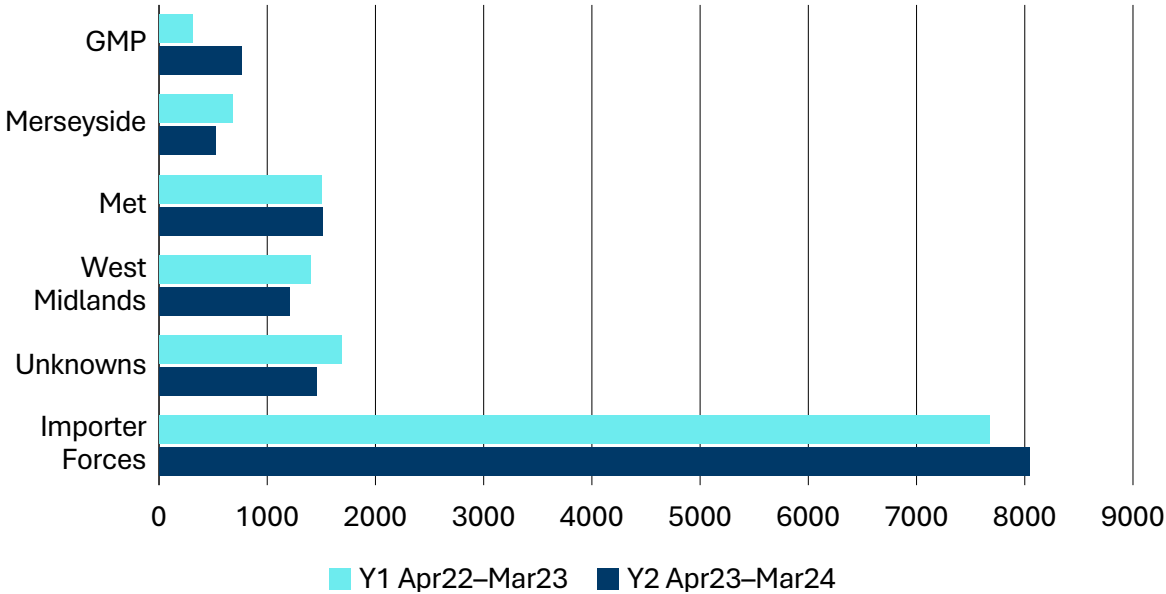


35. The 2019 Keeping Kids Safe report by the Children’s Commissioner<sup>6</sup> found that 27,000 children were involved in gangs, however only one in four of those were known to authorities. With high confidence, there are many more children than the 2,888 identified and recorded by the police, involved or at risk from County Lines, who need protecting. Despite this intelligence gap, our assessment remains that the numbers of children involved has reduced this year.

6 [CCO-Gangs.pdf \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#)

36. 13,084 individuals have been identified as linked to County Lines this year. This is a significant increase on the previous known number of 9,244. NCLCC have increased the range of data sources to provide a more accurate figure for the number of individuals, in the same way that NCLCC have done for assessing the number of drug lines, which has led to a large increase in the total numbers. Applying the same method for each year, with high confidence, total individuals have increased by 5.5% (from 12,399 to 13,084) year-on-year. It is important to note that these individuals will have a variety of roles, including offenders, drug users and victims.

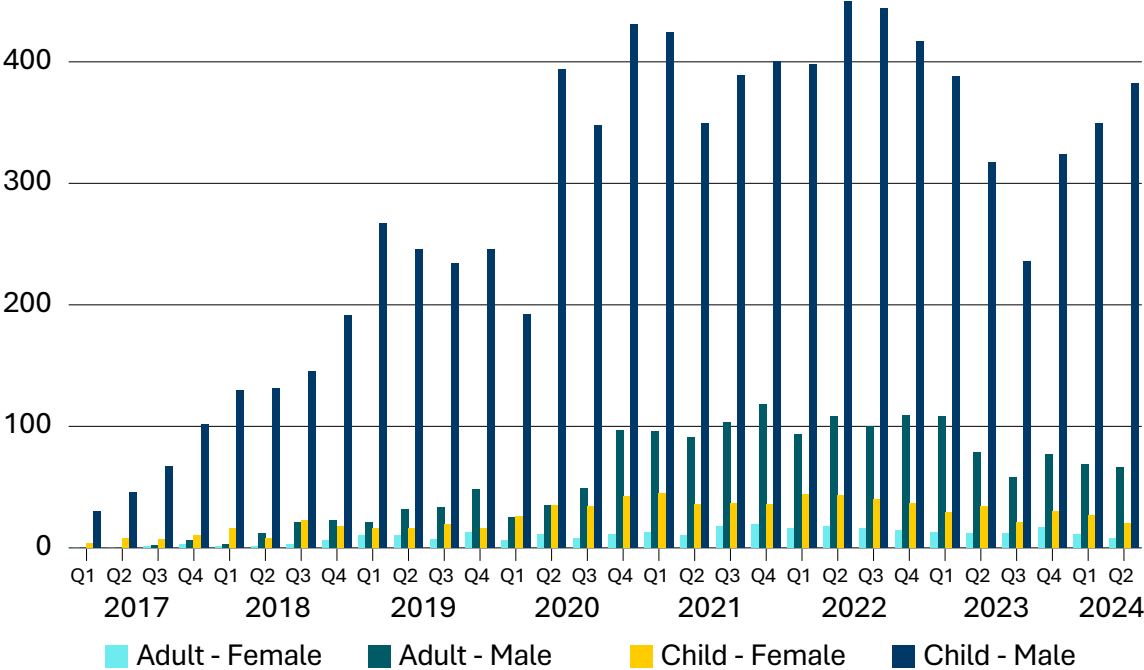
**All individuals by exporting and importing police force areas**



37. Recruitment into County Lines continues to take place in person and online. Intelligence on grooming methods remains limited. With high confidence, peer-to-peer recruitment into County Lines gangs takes place online via social media apps, as well as in person. It is likely that County Lines gangs will target local children more, at the end supply point, as the business model shifts.

38. The most recent data published by the Home Office, in May 2024 for the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)<sup>7</sup> shows, in the period January to March 2024, 425 County Lines referrals were flagged, accounting for 9% of all referrals, with the majority (77%; 326) for male children. This has risen in the period 2020 to 2022, with an average of 580 referrals flagged each quarter, but in 2023 this fell to around 430 for each quarter.

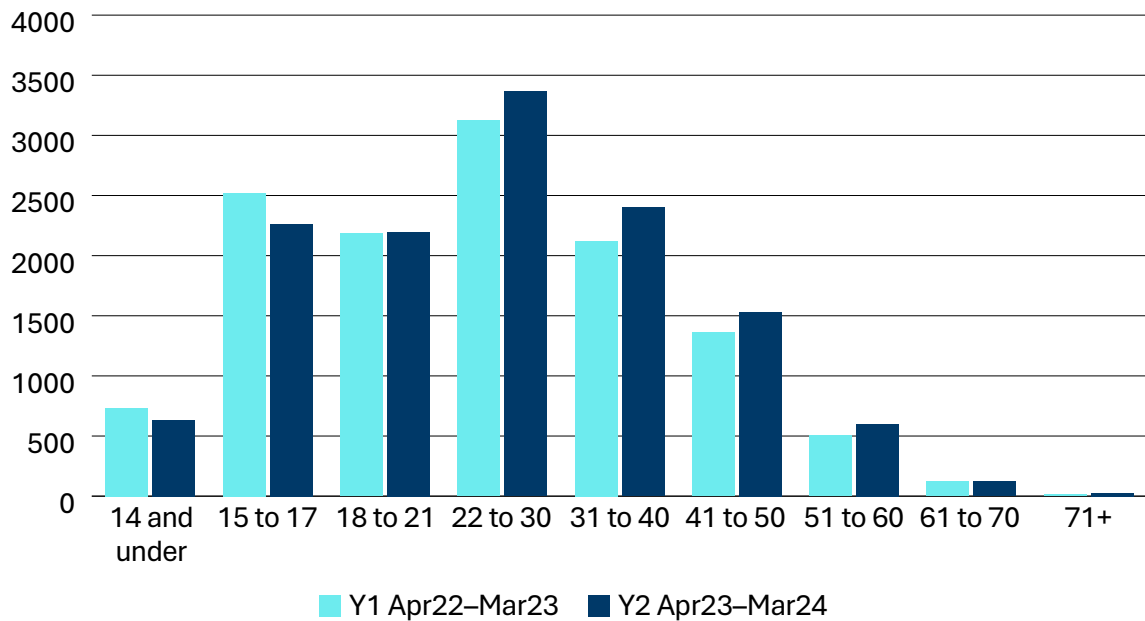
**Number of NRM referrals flagged as County Lines, by age of referral and gender**



7 [Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK, quarter 1 2024 – January to March](#)

39. Adult males between 22 and 30 years of age make up the largest group of individuals recorded. Males account for 83% of all individuals recorded. Most children involved in County Lines are in the 15 to 17 years of age bracket. The average age at which a child is first identified is 16.1 years of age. Most are likely to be boys, with 93% of all children reported being male. They are mainly recorded in a 'runner' or 'workforce' role and linked to exploitation. There are fewer children reported this year in both the 15 to 17 and under-14, age brackets.

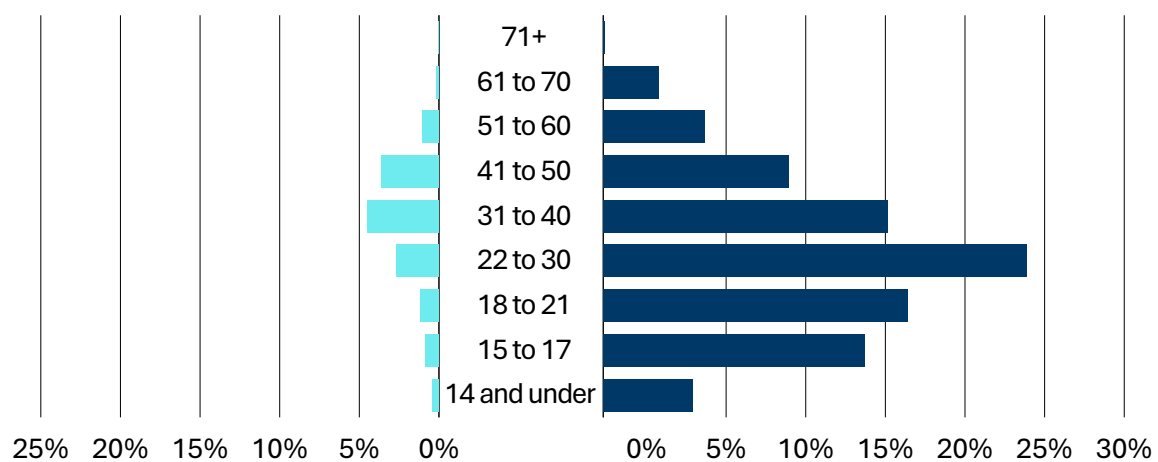
### All individuals



40. Women and girls continue to be under-represented in County Lines, which is likely to be due to their role being more difficult for law enforcement to identify. It is possible that gender biases, including unconscious bias, mean that they are less likely to be interacted with by the police and therefore at greater risk, as there may be less intervention. This year, women and girls account for 14.3% of the total cohort recorded, down from 15.0% last year.

### Female

### Male



41. For all regions (except London) the greatest proportion of individuals are of White ethnicity. However, in all regions, individuals of Black ethnicity, where recorded, are over-represented in comparison to the regional population data (based on the 2021 census). Nationally, 65.7% individuals are of White ethnicity, 22.3% Black, 10.5% Asian and 1.5% other (including mixed).

Submitting Region	White			Black			Asian			Other			Mixed		
	Adult	U18	Census 2021	Adult	U18	Census 2021	Adult	U18	Census 2021	Adult	U18	Census 2021	Adult	U18	Census 2021
BTP	59.7%	56.4%	N/A	27.7%	25.5%	N/A	7.6%	12.7%	N/A	5.0%	5.5%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
London (Met/CoLP)	32.3%	21.9%	53.8%	52.3%	60.1%	13.5%	12.9%	14.0%	20.7%	2.5%	3.9%	6.3%	N/A	N/A	5.7%
East Midlands	66.4%	59.1%	85.7%	26.8%	32.5%	2.7%	6.5%	5.9%	8.0%	0.4%	2.5%	1.3%	N/A	N/A	2.4%
Eastern	62.2%	63.1%	86.5%	26.8%	31.4%	2.9%	9.1%	5.1%	6.4%	1.9%	0.4%	1.4%	N/A	N/A	2.8%
North East	82.3%	84.2%	93.0%	5.8%	7.0%	1.0%	9.7%	7.5%	3.7%	2.3%	1.3%	1.0%	N/A	N/A	1.3%
North West	84.3%	80.7%	85.6%	6.4%	14.9%	2.3%	8.9%	3.2%	8.4%	0.5%	1.3%	1.5%	N/A	N/A	2.2%
Scotland	82.4%	59.2%	96.0%	13.4%	28.6%	0.7%	2.4%	4.1%	2.7%	1.9%	8.2%	0.0%	N/A	N/A	0.6%
South East	62.5%	66.7%	86.3%	29.2%	27.2%	2.4%	7.4%	4.9%	7.0%	0.9%	1.2%	1.5%	N/A	N/A	2.8%
South West	77.4%	77.0%	93.1%	18.3%	18.5%	1.2%	3.5%	3.7%	2.8%	0.8%	0.7%	0.9%	N/A	N/A	2.0%
Southern Wales	77.6%	89.1%	93.8%	13.7%	7.0%	0.9%	6.4%	2.3%	2.9%	2.2%	1.6%	0.9%	N/A	N/A	1.6%
West Midlands	49.5%	52.8%	77.0%	24.8%	31.6%	4.5%	24.0%	13.4%	13.3%	1.7%	2.2%	2.1%	N/A	N/A	3.0%
York & Humber	73.0%	49.6%	85.4%	8.5%	15.4%	2.1%	18.1%	34.2%	8.9%	0.4%	0.9%	1.4%	N/A	N/A	2.1%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>66.0%</b>	<b>64.8%</b>	<b>81.7%</b>	<b>21.6%</b>	<b>25.1%</b>	<b>4.0%</b>	<b>10.9%</b>	<b>8.4%</b>	<b>9.3%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>1.8%</b>	<b>2.1%</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>2.9%</b>

## Missing from Home

42. Children and vulnerable adults who go missing whilst working on County Lines are at high risk of serious harm. The threat of mental, physical and sexual abuse is constant.
43. For this assessment, analysis has been conducted using datasets from seven forces (selected due to data accessibility), from April 2023 to March 2024. 671 people were identified who have had missing episodes where County Lines is believed to be an element or causal factor of the event.

Missing Person	Unknown Age	Adult	Child	Total
White		3.13%	51.71%	<b>54.84%</b>
Black	0.15%	1.04%	22.06%	<b>23.25%</b>
Asian		0.45%	7.75%	<b>8.20%</b>
Other			1.19%	<b>1.19%</b>
Unknown Ethnicity	7.00%	0.30%	5.22%	<b>12.52%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>7.15%</b>	<b>4.92%</b>	<b>87.93%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

44. Whilst the majority of individuals in the cohort were White (at 55%), Black individuals were more likely to go missing (over 8 times more likely). When comparing the data per capita and using census<sup>8</sup> information, Black individuals went missing at a rate of 6.4 per 100,000, compared to 0.76 per 100,000 for White individuals. Enhancing the policing response to missing episodes is a key strategic aim in the Protect strand of the new County Lines Policing Strategy 2024–27.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> [Ethnic group, England and Wales – Office for National Statistics](#)

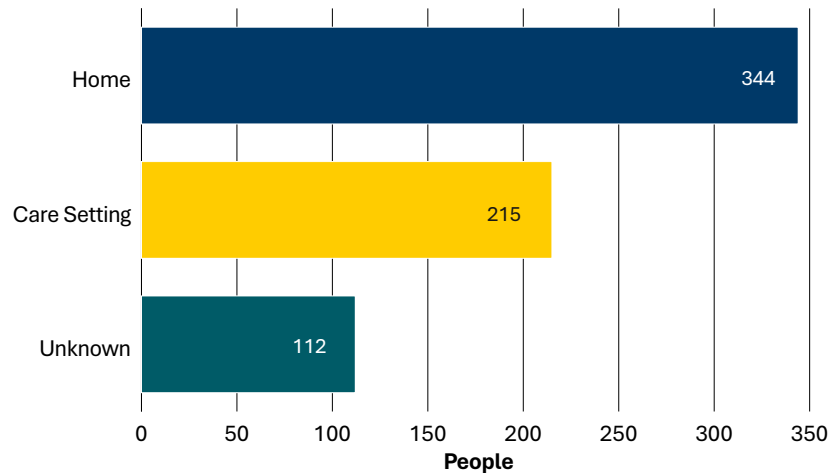
<sup>9</sup> [Launch of the County Lines Policing Strategy 2024 to 2027 \(npcc.police.uk\)](#)



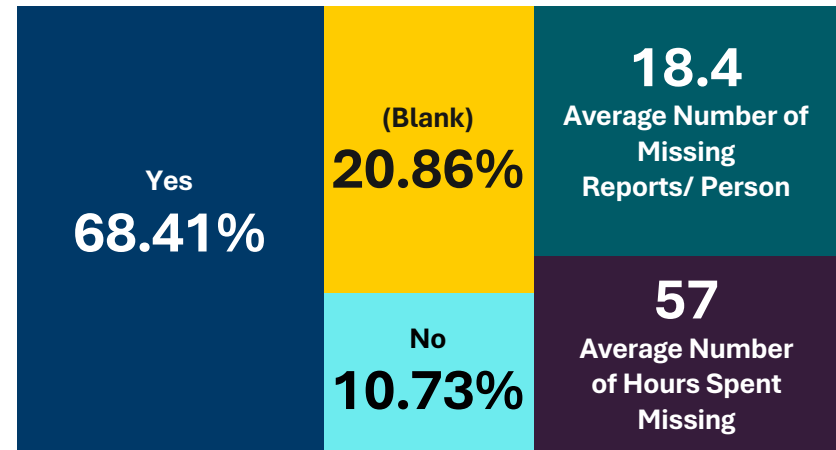
45. Children missing from care were most likely to be repeat missing, and most individuals have repeat missing episodes. Appropriate trigger plans that manage missing episodes via a multi-agency response are key to safeguarding.

46. Whilst a limited data set, missing episodes were found to be generally shorter journeys, with many children located in different areas of the same city. With moderate confidence, this supports the assessment of a shift towards a more localised model.

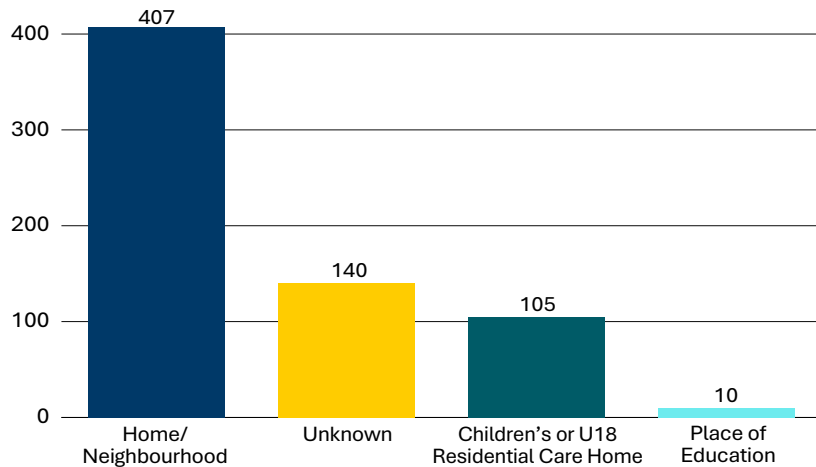
Where are they accommodated?



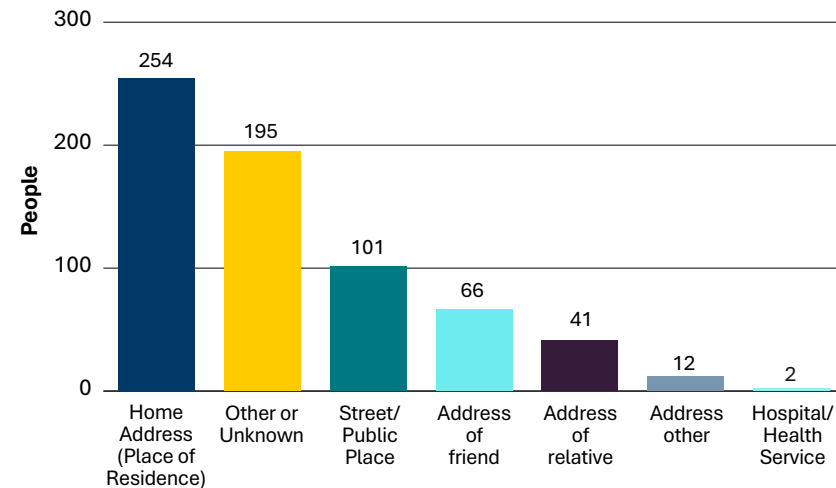
Have they gone missing more than once?



Where are they missing from (top places)?



Where are they being found?



# Cuckooing

47. The term 'cuckooing' refers to the occupation/and or control of an individual's home, in order to commit or facilitate criminal offences. County Lines gangs may use violence and coercion to take over the home of a vulnerable adult for purposes such as the manufacture or cultivation of drugs, processing drugs for sale, storage of weapons or commodity, or selling drugs from the property.
48. In cuckooed premises there is a rise in 'bando diaries' or 'nitty diaries' being shared on social media platforms. The videos will often be of vulnerable adults (male or female) who visibly present suffering from the effects of long-term drug addiction and/or poor mental health. Videos show them being abused, laughed at, violently assaulted, made to clean up or perform in a demeaning way. Videos have been attributed to individuals linked to drugs supply, across the country.
49. The scale of cuckooing is difficult to assess due to limited datasets, however, some indication can be taken from the number of drug lines (728) recorded as using cuckooing as part of their business modus operandi this year. In addition, during County Lines Intensification Week (CLIW) in March 2024, 1,228 properties were visited where cuckooing had been reported or was suspected. This is on a par with the 1,284 visits to cuckooed premises in the October 2023 CLIW and up on the 887 premises visited in the February 2023 CLIW.

# Drugs

## Commodity

Drug Type	External Drug Lines	Internal Drug Lines	Grand Total
Crack cocaine	87.5%	66.9%	<b>75.4%</b>
Heroin	87.3%	67.1%	<b>73.9%</b>
Cocaine	12.6%	25.2%	<b>19.7%</b>
Cannabis	4.7%	17.3%	<b>12.0%</b>
Other	1.6%	8.7%	<b>5.3%</b>
Ketamine	1.6%	1.3%	<b>1.4%</b>
MDMA	0.5%	0.5%	<b>0.7%</b>
Amphetamine	0.3%	0.5%	<b>0.4%</b>
Fentanyl	0.4%	0.2%	<b>0.3%</b>
Ecstasy	0.2%	0.4%	<b>0.3%</b>
LSD	0.2%	0.1%	<b>0.1%</b>
Crystal meth	0.1%	0.1%	<b>0.1%</b>
Cutting agents	0.1%	0.0%	<b>0.0%</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

50. With high confidence, crack cocaine and heroin remain the predominant drugs supplied by County Lines networks. This has reduced from 86.2% and 83.1% of all lines to 75.4% and 73.9% respectively since last year, despite a small increase in the total number of lines supplying crack cocaine and heroin. This shift is driven by a greater diversity in the types of drugs being sold on internal lines, noticeably cocaine, cannabis and other drugs, which includes prescription medicines such as pregabalin.
51. Proportionally fewer internal lines are selling the most harmful drugs predominantly associated with County Lines (crack cocaine and heroin), than external lines, as shown in the drug type table.
52. Lines working out of major cities are moving drugs around the country on both rail and road routes. With high confidence, County Lines gangs are using purpose-built hides in vehicles to conceal and move commodity and cash.
53. Increasingly, heroin is adulterated with synthetic opioids such as nitazenes, which are many times more powerful and a significant health risk to a drug user who may be unaware of what they are consuming. County Lines taskforces and operational teams funded via the County Lines Programme can rapidly respond to active drug lines supplying synthetic opioids, swiftly identifying and closing the drug line, then pursuing the line controller/holder and sending out public health messages warning of the dangers to users who have interacted with the line.

54. Drug testing on arrest is helping to identify those whose criminality may be linked to drug use and for appropriate referrals to treatment services that can reduce both drug use and drug-related offending. The testing of the presence of class A drugs has shown over half of tests were positive for cocaine, opiates or both.

## Drugs Trafficking & Demand

55. Dame Carol Black's 2020 Review of Drugs<sup>10</sup> reported an estimated 300,000 opiate and/or crack cocaine users, whilst the Crime Survey of England and Wales<sup>11</sup> reported no change in the prevalence of class A drug use in the year ending March 2023, indicating demand remains strong. The National Crime Agency (NCA) Drugs Strategic Assessment 2023<sup>12</sup> stated that the overall demand and trends for drugs offences continue to increase. It is much harder for law enforcement to have an impact on resilient, innovative County Lines gangs when operating in these market conditions, hence the importance of building on the synergies between the County Lines Programme activity and Project ADDER (Addiction, Diversion, Disruption, Enforcement and Recovery), which was designed to address drug addiction and stop supply in the hardest-hit local authority areas.
56. It is highly likely the drugs will continue to be sourced from the major cities, irrespective of ingress routes into the country. At the County Lines level, the drugs move from major cities into importing areas for the manufacture of crack, using local assistance. This is unlikely to change regardless of the model becoming more localised, with links to the major exporter forces remaining.
57. It is highly likely that the postal system is being increasingly used to transport and deliver drugs and weapons (particularly knives), alongside existing road and rail transport routes.

## Drug-Related Death

58. Cocaine and heroin are linked to at least half of all drug-related deaths. The most recent available Office of National Statistics (ONS) data<sup>13</sup> (up to the end of 2022; released December 2023) states 4,907 deaths related to drug poisoning registered in 2022, equivalent to a rate of 84.4 deaths per million people. 46% involved an opiate and 17.5% involved cocaine. Deaths attributed to addictive medicines are showing a rising trend.
59. The data shows regional disparity. The northeast region has more than double the drug-related death rate of London. For the last 10 years, it has had the highest rate of deaths by drug poisoning.
60. On a per capita basis, Wales and Scotland are disproportionately affected by nitazene and xylazine deaths, which are over four times higher in Scotland and three times higher in Wales when compared to England.
61. The drug-related death data indicates how risky poly-use of drugs has become.

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10 [Review of drugs: summary \(accessible version\) – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

11 [Drug misuse in England and Wales – Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

12 [National Strategic Assessment \(NSA\) Campaign 2023 – Drugs – National Crime Agency](#)

13 [ONS data on drug deaths and poisoning – 2022](#)

## Social Media Drug Lines

62. The number of social media accounts advertising drugs for sale is increasing. This specific online drugs market has a broad range of illegal drugs offered for sale, including cocaine, cannabis, MDMA, LSD, crystal meth, ketamine, unlicensed prescription medications, cannabis edibles, cannabis-based products and psychoactive substances. These products have been found supplied via traditional drug lines but in small numbers.
63. Crack cocaine and heroin is rarely available for sale on social media accounts advertising drugs for sale, and instead continues to dominate the traditional County Lines market, offered for retail supply on-street, via burner or 'graft' phones. This is representative of how the online drugs supply market operates in a different way to the supply of class A drugs (predominantly crack cocaine and heroin) via the traditional County Lines model.
64. The postal system is used to transport commodity supplied online, for delivery to the end user.
65. As well as advertising drugs for sale, social media is increasingly used as the main communication tool for recruiting drug runners. Recent reports from several forces advised of lines recruiting children into drugs lines via well-known social media apps, used to send messages to encourage or groom them to work on the respective line selling drugs.

# Violence

## Harm Analysis

66. Analysis of known County Lines offenders has found a high number with previous violent offending histories. 76.5% (three in every four County Lines offenders) have one or more previous arrests for offences of violence and/or the possession of weapons.
67. Offences of serious violence and knife possession feature prominently across the data and are reflective of the frequency with which County Lines gangs carry weapons, along with the risk of violence being used as part of how the illegal drugs supply business is operated.
68. The most recent data for under-25 hospital admissions due to assault by sharp objects shows a reduction in exporter force areas. There has been a stable decrease over time, correlating with the duration of the CL Programme, however it is difficult to assess causation.

## Prisons

69. County Lines offenders have been linked to activities to supply commodity into prison, such as the supply of 'spice' (synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists), using drones and throw-overs. In some cases, convicted County Lines offenders control lines from inside prison, with lines of communication running out into local communities. Some offenders seek to continue their drugs supply business from prison, maintaining contact with their criminal networks.
70. A cohort of 5,784 offenders currently housed within the prison estate are known to have been involved in County Lines. 1,886 (32.6%) of these have charges or convictions for weapons, either bladed, firearm or other (classed as an offensive weapon) irrespective of any other charge. From the total cohort 1,040 nominals are incarcerated for most serious violence, including:
  - 644 – Wounding/GBH
  - 213 – Murder
  - 88 – Manslaughter
  - 91 – Attempted murder
  - 4 – Assisting an offender (murder)
71. A quarter of all the murder or manslaughter offences and a third of wounding offences occur alongside a charge for supplying drugs.

# Emerging trends

- With high confidence, the threat from synthetic opioids will continue to grow, as highlighted in the NCA National Strategic Assessment 2023.<sup>14</sup>
- The localisation of the business model may lead to people going missing for shorter times/distances and for exploitation to be more local. This could have implications for how law enforcement identifies and responds, as it may become more difficult to spot, and highlights the importance of a multi-agency response.
- Online drugs supply markets are expanding, facilitated by social media to advertise sales, and the postal system for transportation and delivery. It is likely this market will continue to grow without stronger interventions by technology companies.

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14 [National Strategic Assessment \(NSA\) Campaign 2023 – Overview of SOC – National Crime Agency](#)

# Intelligence Gaps

- The role of women and girls within the County Lines model continues to appear under-reported and therefore remains a gap in our understanding.
- Recording of cuckooing varies across forces and is difficult to assess, whilst data capture processes remain inconsistent.
- The scale of child criminal exploitation linked to County Lines is highly likely to be under-reported. Victims often do not see themselves as such and policing must ensure it consistently recognises and responds appropriately to vulnerability and exploitation.
- A more localised model may operate differently, and it is necessary to continue to develop understanding of this change, such as the types of drugs supplied and harms caused.
- Enhancing the understanding of the upstream supply chain, particularly for synthetic opioids, will help to tackle both County Lines and the broader drugs supply threat.
- This report is limited by the quality and quantity of data available, via the source systems of PND and PNC. This affects the ability to assess the nature and scale of the threat, with an example being 50% of OCGs recorded by 2 of 10 regions, significantly limiting the understanding of the scale of County Lines gang activity.
- There can be difficulties in confirming actual County Lines activity as opposed to general drugs supply, and this somewhat subjective assessment may affect the extent of data reported. An example of this is the recent increase in internal lines, now that they are widely understood to form part of County Lines activity, which do not need to cross arbitrary force borders.





# Glossary

<b>ABH</b>	Actual Bodily Harm
<b>APMIS</b>	Agency and Partner Management Information System. A national database which records serious and organised crime threat assessments and disruption activity.
<b>CCE</b>	HM Government defines child criminal exploitation as: “Child criminal exploitation is common in County Lines and occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.”
<b>CL</b>	HO Definition Home Office definition of a County Line: “...a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of “deal line”. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.”
<b>Exporter force</b>	Forces where County Lines drugs supply originates from.
<b>External lines</b>	Drug lines that start within one force and end within another.
<b>Generic line</b>	PND system way of recording County Lines activity when the exact line telephone number or social media handle is not known.
<b>GBH</b>	Grievous Bodily Harm
<b>GMP</b>	Greater Manchester Police
<b>Internal lines</b>	Drug lines that start and end within the same force area.
<b>Importer force</b>	Forces which import County Lines drugs supply, meaning it ends up in these areas.
<b>Met</b>	Metropolitan Police Service
<b>NCLCC</b>	National County Lines Coordination Centre
<b>NRM</b>	The National Referral Mechanism is a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support.
<b>NCA</b>	National Crime Agency

<b>OCG</b>	Organised Crime Group – CPS legal guidance states OCGs are made up of members who plan, coordinate and carry out serious crime on a continuing basis. Their motivation is often, but not always, financial gain. OCG structure varies but often consists of a core of key individuals, surrounded by subordinates and other more transient members, as well as an extended network of associates. Many OCGs are loose networks of criminals that come together for a specific criminal activity, acting in different roles depending on their skills and expertise. Collaboration can be facilitated by family or ethnic ties, shared experiences such as prison as well as associations formed in schools, youth settings, children’s homes, etc. OCGs will often use violence and intimidation in communities in order to operate.
<b>PNC</b>	Police National Computer
<b>PND</b>	Police National Database
<b>SOC</b>	Serious and Organised Crime
<b>SOCN</b>	Serious and Organised Crime Nominal (usually within a prison).
<b>STRA</b>	Strategic Threat Risk Assessment
<b>USG</b>	Urban Street Gang – CPS legal guidance states urban street gangs tend to be less organised than OCGs and more concerned with perpetuating a threat of violence or harm across a geographical area related to the gang’s main activities. These types of gangs can be involved in varied forms of serious criminality that can have a significant impact on local communities.
<b>WMP</b>	West Midlands Police

# Appendix

## Data Table

Where the drug sold by the line is identified and entered onto PND

DRUG	FY 23-24	% of Total	Previous Year %
Crack Cocaine	3,167	75.4%	86.2%
Heroin	3,104	73.9%	83.1%
Cocaine	829	19.7%	12.5%
Cannabis	505	12.0%	6.5%
Other	222	5.3%	2.7%
Ketamine	57	1.4%	0.5%
MDMA	29	0.7%	0.5%
Amphetamine	15	0.4%	0.1%
Fentanyl	14	0.3%	0.1%
Ecstasy	11	0.3%	0.1%
LSD	5	0.1%	0.0%
Crystal Meth	3	0.1%	0.0%
Cutting Agents	2	0.0%	0.0%
Carfentanyl	0	0.0%	0.0%
Legal Highs	0	0.0%	0.0%
Grand Total	4,201	100.0%	100.0%

# Demographic Charts

PNC and PND data tables combined to show the demographics of individuals identified as linked to a County Line in any way. The table includes exploited victims as well as suspects.

A small number of records have multiple ethnicities or no ethnicities shown, and therefore may not appear in the data.

National – total numbers:

Age Range	White			Black			Asian			Other		
	Male	Female	Combined M/F	Male	Female	Combined M/F	Male	Female	Combined M/F	Male	Female	Combined M/F
<b>14 and under</b>	274	39	313	79	6	85	26	4	30	6	1	7
<b>15 to 17</b>	1,031	96	1,127	444	26	470	142	12	154	31	2	33
<b>18 to 21</b>	942	92	1,034	525	25	550	245	3	248	42	1	43
<b>22 to 30</b>	1,356	228	1,584	814	29	843	432	9	441	37	2	39
<b>31 to 40</b>	1,090	437	1,526	316	23	339	188	7	195	33	1	34
<b>41 to 50</b>	786	363	1,149	107	15	122	78	3	81	8	1	9
<b>51 to 60</b>	336	121	457	57	4	61	12	0	12	4	1	5
<b>61 to 70</b>	69	15	84	11	0	11	1	0	1	1	0	1
<b>71+</b>	14	4	18	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>5,869</b>	<b>1,392</b>	<b>7,260</b>	<b>2,342</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>2,469</b>	<b>1,118</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>1,156</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>168</b>

National percentages of ethnicities for each gender for each age range:

Age Range	White			Black			Asian			Other		
	Male	Female	Combined M/F	Male	Female	Combined M/F	Male	Female	Combined M/F	Male	Female	Combined M/F
<b>14 and under</b>	71.2%	78.0%	72.0%	20.5%	12.0%	19.5%	6.8%	8.0%	6.9%	1.6%	2.0%	1.6%
<b>15 to 17</b>	62.6%	70.6%	63.2%	26.9%	19.1%	26.3%	8.6%	8.8%	8.6%	1.9%	1.5%	1.8%
<b>18 to 21</b>	53.7%	76.0%	55.1%	29.9%	20.7%	29.3%	14.0%	2.5%	13.2%	2.4%	0.8%	2.3%
<b>22 to 30</b>	51.4%	85.1%	54.5%	30.8%	10.8%	29.0%	16.4%	3.4%	15.2%	1.4%	0.7%	1.3%
<b>31 to 40</b>	67.0%	93.4%	72.9%	19.4%	4.9%	16.2%	11.6%	1.5%	9.3%	2.0%	0.2%	1.6%
<b>41 to 50</b>	80.3%	95.0%	84.4%	10.9%	3.9%	9.0%	8.0%	0.8%	6.0%	0.8%	0.3%	0.7%
<b>51 to 60</b>	82.2%	96.0%	85.4%	13.9%	3.2%	11.4%	2.9%	0.0%	2.2%	1.0%	0.8%	0.9%
<b>61 to 70</b>	84.1%	100.0%	86.6%	13.4%	0.0%	11.3%	1.2%	0.0%	1.0%	1.2%	0.0%	1.0%
<b>71+</b>	87.5%	100.0%	90.0%	6.3%	0.0%	5.0%	6.3%	0.0%	5.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>61.9%</b>	<b>88.9%</b>	<b>65.7%</b>	<b>24.7%</b>	<b>8.1%</b>	<b>22.3%</b>	<b>11.8%</b>	<b>2.4%</b>	<b>10.5%</b>	<b>1.7%</b>	<b>0.6%</b>	<b>1.5%</b>

National ethnicity breakdown by submitting region, divided by age:

Submitting Region	White		Black		Asian		Other	
	Adult	U18	Adult	U18	Adult	U18	Adult	U18
<b>BTP</b>	71	31	33	14	9	7	6	3
<b>City of London</b>	30	0	8	2	12	1	1	0
<b>East Midlands</b>	513	120	207	66	50	12	3	5
<b>Eastern</b>	1,160	297	500	148	170	24	36	2
<b>Metropolitan</b>	257	39	457	105	103	24	21	7
<b>North East</b>	543	192	38	16	64	17	15	3
<b>North West</b>	1,151	255	87	47	121	10	7	4
<b>Scotland</b>	350	29	57	14	10	2	8	4
<b>South East</b>	339	54	158	22	40	4	5	1
<b>South West</b>	308	104	73	25	14	5	3	1
<b>Southern Wales</b>	277	115	49	9	23	3	8	2
<b>West Midlands</b>	566	169	284	101	274	43	20	7
<b>Yorks &amp; Humber</b>	410	58	48	18	102	40	2	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>5,921</b>	<b>1,446</b>	<b>1,940</b>	<b>560</b>	<b>982</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>40</b>

National ethnicity breakdown by submitting region, percentages of ethnicities for each age range for each region:

Submitting Region	White		Black		Asian		Other	
	Adult	U18	Adult	U18	Adult	U18	Adult	U18
<b>BTP</b>	59.7%	56.4%	27.7%	25.5%	7.6%	12.7%	5.0%	5.5%
<b>City of London</b>	58.8%	0.0%	15.7%	66.7%	23.5%	33.3%	2.0%	0.0%
<b>East Midlands</b>	66.4%	59.1%	26.8%	32.5%	6.5%	5.9%	0.4%	2.5%
<b>Eastern</b>	62.2%	63.1%	26.8%	31.4%	9.1%	5.1%	1.9%	0.4%
<b>Metropolitan</b>	30.7%	22.3%	54.5%	60.0%	12.3%	13.7%	2.5%	4.0%
<b>North East</b>	82.3%	84.2%	5.8%	7.0%	9.7%	7.5%	2.3%	1.3%
<b>North West</b>	84.3%	80.7%	6.4%	14.9%	8.9%	3.2%	0.5%	1.3%
<b>Scotland</b>	82.4%	59.2%	13.4%	28.6%	2.4%	4.1%	1.9%	8.2%
<b>South East</b>	62.5%	66.7%	29.2%	27.2%	7.4%	4.9%	0.9%	1.2%
<b>South West</b>	77.4%	77.0%	18.3%	18.5%	3.5%	3.7%	0.8%	0.7%
<b>Southern Wales</b>	77.6%	89.1%	13.7%	7.0%	6.4%	2.3%	2.2%	1.6%
<b>West Midlands</b>	49.5%	52.8%	24.8%	31.6%	24.0%	13.4%	1.7%	2.2%
<b>Yorks &amp; Humber</b>	73.0%	49.6%	8.5%	15.4%	18.1%	34.2%	0.4%	0.9%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>66.0%</b>	<b>64.8%</b>	<b>21.6%</b>	<b>25.1%</b>	<b>10.9%</b>	<b>8.4%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>1.8%</b>

