THE POLICING OF 'COUNTY LINES' IN AFFECTED IMPORT TOWNS: EXPLORING LOCAL RESPONSES TO EVOLVING HEROIN AND CRACK MARKETS

Jack Spicer

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Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol

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Abstract

Across the UK, markets for heroin and crack cocaine in provincial towns are evolving. Due to the high-profile drug market development termed 'County Lines', retail supply in many areas is now seemingly dominated by 'out of town' dealers who have established 'import' markets often far from their native city. Associated with this are significant harms and implications for affected local areas. This thesis presents findings of an exploratory ethnographic study that investigated how County Lines was being understood and responded to at a local level. The research was undertaken in two phases. The first involved in-depth interviews with police officers tasked with responding to the County Lines 'problem' in their force area. The second phase consisted of a period of in-depth ethnographic fieldwork with a different police force, using participant observation and further interviewing with officers and those working for other agencies in affected provincial towns. Three narrative literature review chapters set the theoretical foundations for the thesis. Critical discussions are provided in relation to drug markets, the specific development of County Lines and the policing of drug markets. The subsequent empirical chapters build on this, contributing to gaps in knowledge regarding the nature of these evolving drug markets and how this market development is being understood and responded to at a local level. It is argued that much of the policing of County Lines, whether it be through new or traditional approaches, can be considered 'symbolic'. A somewhat organic shift towards applying harm reduction principles to this market context is also noted, with the enduring challenges associated with such a policing approach also highlighted. In addition to empirically and theoretically developing these two extant drug policing perspectives, the thesis therefore contributes to the growing focus on County Lines, adding deep insight into how this burgeoning outreach drug supply model is specifically affecting local markets, their actors and those responding to it.

Author Declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award.

During the period of study the author has published two articles in peer reviewed journals:

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Part of the sole authored article published in the journal '*Policing and Society'* are reproduced in chapter six of this thesis with permission granted by the publishers, Taylor & Francis (see appendix A).

The content of the co-authored article is not reproduced in this thesis but is cited throughout.

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Contents

Figures

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1.0 Introduction

Across the UK, a high-profile drug market development involving the outreach practices of drug dealing networks from major supply hubs to provincial satellite areas has occurred (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). Referred to as the phenomenon of 'County Lines', urban groups involved primarily in the supply of crack cocaine and heroin have been reported to be increasingly expanding their operations from major urban conurbations to coastal and market towns, using dedicated phone lines to facilitate supply (NCA, 2016; Robinson et al., 2018; Whittaker et al., 2019). The emergence and intensification of this outreach practice has generated significant attention and concern among law enforcement and other related agencies (NCA, 2017), subsequently permeating out to political and policy arenas (e.g. APPG, 2017; St Giles Trust, 2018), as well as the media (e.g. Guardian, 2019). It has therefore become what Wacquant (2008) refers to as a 'newsy' topic. Of particular concern has been the associated increase, both in seriousness and frequency, of what might be termed 'systemic' drug market violence (Goldstein, 1985) in affected areas, the involvement of young people (Windle and Briggs, 2015a) and the exploitation of local populations (Coliandris, 2015). More broadly, it has been suggested that this development and its prevalence marks a distinct 'evolution' in the functioning of retail heroin and crack markets outside of major cities (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). Posing as an area ripe for empirical inquiry, this thesis presents findings of an exploratory ethnographic study into the effect of County Lines on provincial towns, specifically focusing on how this is being understood and responded to by police at a local level. The purpose of this short opening chapter is to introduce the research and the rationale for undertaking it. It concludes by outlining the structure and content of the remainder of the thesis.

1.1 Introducing the research: Context and purpose

The clandestine world of illicit drug markets, their propensity for change and how law enforcement respond to them has long been a staple concern of criminology (Briggs

and Monge-Ramaro, 2016; Curtis and Wendel, 2007; Goldstein et al., 1989). Due to how their actors and the substances involved are constructed, drug markets and the issues associated with them often generate intense interest and speculation, with the so called 'drug war', and those on both sides that play key roles in this long running saga, continuing to be the subject of scrutiny, controversy and debate (Gossop, 2016; Inciardi, 2008). Imbued with mythology and moralising, it is an area that occupies a distinct cultural and political place, where lines are drawn on what is right and wrong (Coomber, 2006; Reinarman and Levine, 1989; Linneman, 2016; Young, 1971).

However, beyond their symbolic qualities and what they represent, it is important to note that drug markets are also often the site of significant harms to individuals and communities (Coomber, 2015; Hall et al., 2008; Kleiman, 2005; May and Hough, 2004). Corresponding with wider trends of organised crime group mobility and how networks are being 'pushed' and 'pulled' to different locations (see Morselli et al., 2011), the itinerant nature of County Lines suggests this may present new challenges for the police in previously unsuspecting areas. Research on the topic of County Lines is limited. This is somewhat inevitable given it is a recent development, but this is especially the case for affected 'import' areas (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992). Reflecting the emphasis placed in media and political discourse, what has been written has almost exclusively focused on the involvement of young people and how this can be understood in relation to 'gang' activity (e.g. Robinson et al., 2018; Whittaker et al., 2019). Specifically focusing on the local context of County Lines and the understandings surrounding it, this thesis explores the implications of this high-profile drug market evolution for provincial towns, local police and other actors responding to it. In so doing, it scrutinises the meanings and impact of this crack and heroin supply development in areas where this supply methodology has been identified as operating.

While serving as the backbone of this thesis, this overarching focus on the localised context of County Lines also interplays with a complementary inquiry. As Marks et al. (2016) note, while a substantial body of research on drug policing exists, surprisingly little has involved direct observations and interactions with officers during the course

of their duties. Notable British exceptions to this are the ethnographies of Bacon (2016a) and Collison (1995). However, analyses in this area are predominantly grounded in findings gleaned from drug market actors (e.g. Coomber et al. 2017; Maher and Dixon, 1999). This is not to criticise this body of research, as it undoubtedly provides important insights and gives voice to often unheard, marginalised populations. But to make sense of the "complex relationship between the law on the books and that on the streets" (Marks et al. 2016, p. 323), research undertaken alongside the police that penetrates their 'presentational front' (Goffman, 1959) is required.

Lee and South (2008, p.516) have suggested that drug policing research should address how tensions and contradictions within drug policy are '(re)produced and negotiated'. It is within this contemporary drug market context of County Lines that an analysis of drug policing can therefore be undertaken, with a particular focus on the strategies and tactics used and how these operate in practice (Bear, 2016; Marks and Howell, 2016). Doing so provides the opportunity to build upon the body of work that has specifically focused on law enforcement in this area. For this thesis, Bacon's (2016a) ethnographic work serves as inspiration, both methodologically and in relation to the notion of applying harm reduction principles to the policing of drug markets stressed as being worthy of further exploration. The perspective of 'symbolic policing' proposed by Coomber et al. (2017) also serves as a valuable theoretical framework, not least because the nature of the fieldwork undertaken for this research provided the opportunity view the activities and justifications of drug policing from within the vantage points of police stations and those inhabiting them, a position that their original analysis and formulation of the perspective did not derive from. Relating back to the overarching focus on County Lines, in turn this ethnographic endeavour focus also serves to address the call from Windle and Briggs (2015a) for greater understanding of how agencies are responding to this issue. In short, therefore, due to it being a recent development, the lack of understanding surrounding it and, especially when commencing the project, the absence of academic research, the aim of this thesis is to shed light on the realities of the County Lines phenomenon and how it is being responded to at a local level.

1.2 Thesis Structure

To conclude this short introductory chapter, it is worth providing an outline for what is to come. Because this thesis focuses on the issue of County Lines specifically through a drug market perspective, it is vital for this to be grounded in the wider body of work in this area. The next chapter therefore presents a narrative review of the literature on drug markets, introducing and critically discussing these environments of illicit exchange. It focuses on three key areas that are of general enduring concern but of particular importance in relation to exploring County Lines. First it focuses on how drug markets are conceptualised. It is argued that critically understanding how markets function and their wider structures is important, and that doing so through the lens of a 'socialised' understanding provides important nuance and analytic value. Second, the chapter focuses on the figure of the drug dealer. Beyond the associated myths and stereotypes, it is argued that it is crucial to appreciate the sometimes subtle, sometimes more prominent variance among these actors, the organisations they are associated with and the markets they service. Finally, it focuses on the relationship between drug markets and violence. A critical discussion is provided on the dominant 'systemic' understanding and explanation of why drug market violence occurs proffered by Goldstein (1985). Building on the previous two sections it is argued that greater understanding is possible by situating it in relation to social and cultural conditions, as well as a more nuanced understanding of the actors involved.

Having outlined the wider drug market context, chapter three specifically focusses on the development of County Lines. Drawing on the limited literature available on the subject it firstly provides an outline of what this drug supply methodology is and clarifies the etymology of the term and how it is used throughout the rest of the thesis. Second, it traces the development of the phenomenon in relation to official documents and reports, while also critically discussing this by drawing on relevant grey literature. Third, it addresses some of the arguments as to why this 'evolution' has occurred, unpacking the central concept of market 'saturation'. Finally, it focuses on some of the issues associated with this outreach supply methodology and the reasons why it has generated such high levels of concern and attention. The chapter

therefore provides vital insight on the topic, while also being a useful exercise in synthesising all of the relevant literature that was available on the subject during the period of study.

Chapter four provides the final literature-based chapter. Focusing on drug policing, it examines how drug markets and their noxious elements have been responded to by agents of formal social control. Building on issues raised in the previous chapters it first addresses how policing has been structured in response to drug markets and the traditional ways that the police have sought to tackle these illicit environments and those who populate them. Second, it moves on to take an explicitly critical view of the policing of this area. It is argued that law enforcement activity has been ineffective in relation to the stated aims of prohibition, has caused numerous harms and can frequently be considered as 'symbolic' in its concerns with sending out messages to others. Finally, it discusses alternative ways of policing this area. Drawing on the modest amount of valuable literature on this area, it specifically addresses the notion of applying harm reduction principles to drug markets. It is suggested that this poses as a valuable perspective, allowing researchers a productive avenue to explore, but is one that also requires further empirical and theoretical development.

Chapter five provides a thorough methodological account of the empirical research undertaken for this research. It provides a detailed description of the two main phases of data collection and analysis, how they relate to one another and the research questions that were addressed. It justifies the methodological position undertaken and the use of ethnography to answer these research questions. Drawing on the history of police research and situating the thesis in the context of contemporary scholarship, an important reflexive discussion is provided on how the research and I, as the researcher, was situated. Finally, it details and provides a critical outline of the analytic approach used with the gathered data. In so doing, the chapter allows for the findings presented in the subsequent chapters to be appropriately assessed and understood.

Extending the content of the published paper entitled '*That's their brand their business: how police officers are interpreting County Lines'* (see Spicer, 2018), chapter

six provides the first of three chapters that draw on original empirical data. It reports on an analysis of in-depth interviews with police officers tasked with responding to County Lines in an affected force area undertaken as an initial exploratory phase of the research. Based around a core analytic category of 'profit maximisation', it provides detail on the supply methodology, the associated harms and some of the surrounding meanings and understandings of their towns being infiltrated by 'out of town' dealers. It also addresses some of the initial ways that officers considered responding to County Lines. In addition to these insights, the analysis provides valuable conceptual foundations for the subsequent empirical inquiry.

Chapter seven provides ethnographic findings and analysis of initial police responses to County Lines at a local, 'import' level. It details two main forms of responses that occurred in provincial towns to the threat of these outsider dealers. First were those specifically bespoke or novel to this drug market development. Two prominent examples are analysed in the form of the 'Drug Dealing Telecommunications Restrictions Order' and the pursuit of Modern Slavery convictions. Second were traditional drug policing responses applied or adapted to this specific drug market context. Again, two prominent examples and their undertaking by local officers are analysed in the form of 'crackdown operations' and 'days of action'. Throughout, the findings are contextualised in relation to the 'symbolic' policing perspective proposed by Coomber et al. (2017). It is argued this is a valuable way of understanding the responses to County Lines and that the empirical data and analysis serve to develop this perspective.

Chapter eight provides further ethnographic findings and analysis, focusing specifically on the notion of applying harm reduction principles to the policing of these local drug markets. Using one particular dealing operation as a case in point, it firstly highlights the variance visible among those dealers that conform to the County Lines supply methodology, suggesting the opportunity for such a strategy to be used. However, by detailing the realities of responding to this case it also highlights the practical and theoretical challenges associated with implementing such an approach. The chapter moves on to talk about a prioritisation strategy that was adopted that would appear to illustrate a genuine way in which the policing of County Lines and

local drug markets more generally might be able to move towards a more nuanced, pragmatic, harm focused approach. Finally, the chapter reflects on some of the challenges associated with this and experienced by officers seeking to pursue this model of prioritisation. In so doing, in addition to providing further insight into local responses to County Lines, it adds important empirical and theoretical insight to the realities of the police applying harm reduction principles to how they respond to and manage drug markets.

Chapter nine concludes the thesis. It reflects on and synthesises the key findings and arguments made in the previous chapters, highlighting the empirical insights and the theoretical developments provided in relation to the theories and perspectives discussed in the literature review chapters. Building on this, a discussion is provided on the role of social policy and drug policy in responding to County Lines. It is stressed that these are central to effective responses, but that they interplay with and structure the field in which policing operates. Finally, it concludes by reflecting on the limitations of the study, the contributions to knowledge the thesis makes and areas worthy for future research.

2.0 Illicit drug markets: Conceptions, actors and violence

2.1 Introduction

Increasingly since the mid twentieth century, a range of academic disciplines have placed their attention on illicit drug supply, generating insights that have shaped understandings, interpretations and where subsequent research can situate itself (Moeller, 2018a). Because of this, and given the focus of this thesis, it can be considered important to contextualise any contemporary drug supply development such as County Lines within existing conceptual understandings of how drug markets function. It is also key to recognise that drug markets are not just simply about the exchange of drugs and currency (Davis, 1992). Often representing very different things to different people, they are imbued with meanings, cultures and codes, as well as being linked with conditions of social exclusion and acts of violence. They may be market places, fundamentally rooted in transactions between buyers and sellers, but there is, it would seem, much more to them than just that.

Before providing a specific discussion on County Lines, it is therefore firstly worth reviewing what has been written about drug markets more generally, constructing a narrative review and conceptual grounding to be drawn on throughout the thesis. Providing this contextualisation is also important with regard to an analysis of how markets are responded to. As Bacon (2016a, p.49) notes "An understanding of markets for illegal drugs underpins any scholarly discussion of drug control policy and the policing of drugs". Adopting the language of the drug war, there is a need to understand who the 'enemy' is. To provide this context, this chapter critically reviews the diverse and burgeoning extant body of literature on drug markets. It explicitly focuses on the British context but, where appropriate, draws on theoretical and empirical work from elsewhere. Divided into three sections, it focuses on some of

the key debates and findings that continue to underscore considerations of drug markets. In so doing it raises manifest and latent issues that are critically relevant to that subsequently explored in the thesis.

In the first section, a discussion is provided on how drug markets are conceptualised and structured. Highlighted is the importance of a 'socialised' understanding of these environments and how the characteristics and functioning of retail markets can vary across time and place. In the second section, critical attention is placed on those figures who play a fundamental role in the process of drug supply: the drug dealer. Using Dorn et al.'s (1992) typology as a point of departure, it stresses the diverse roles, actors and motivations that fall under this catch-all term, seeking to update these insights in line with more recent findings. Being an issue that consistently generates fear, concern and attention, and which is critically relevant to the subject of County Lines, the final section of the chapter focuses on drug market violence. It outlines and critiques the dominant 'systemic' perspective on why this occurs. Continuing the theme that runs throughout the chapter, it is suggested that a more nuanced, contextual understanding that recognises variance is important.

2.2 Conceptualising the drug market

The concept of 'drug market' is widely referred to and often somewhat taken for granted (Coomber, 2004). Regularly evoked in academic, policy and public discourse, they are sites of fear, study and intrigue (Coomber, 2011). However, a clear and consistent understanding of what a drug market is and what this term means is sometimes lacking (Johnson and Ratcliffe, 2013; Murji, 2007). Instead of definitional precision, coherence has arguably been hampered by a process of abstraction and 'conceptual slippage' (Dwyer and Moore, 2010). One of the main reasons for this would appear to be the multi-disciplinary nature of drug market research. Illustrating this, Ritter (2006, p.453) has identified five distinct disciplinary approaches commonly used to study this area, which are:

> *"ethnographic and qualitative approaches; economic approaches; behavioural and psychological research; population-based and survey research; criminology and law enforcement evaluation"*

Each of these approaches has their own favoured methods and underlying theoretical perspectives. In turn, they often have somewhat different interpretations of what a drug market is due to their disciplinary interests and the lenses adopted when focusing on this area. For economists, drug markets are typically interpreted through the framework of resource exchange (Galenianos et al. 2012). A focus is placed on issues such as supply and demand, with attempts often undertaken at modelling the dynamics of the market and their elasticity (e.g. Caulkins and Reuter, 1998; Reuter and Greenfield, 2001). In comparison, qualitative studies typically take an 'appreciative' stance (Matza, 1969), exploring the actors involved, the interactions that take place, the specific conditions within a locale, and how these may relate to wider structural issues (e.g. Bourgois, 2003; Briggs and Monge Gamero, 2016). Alternatively, some criminological approaches focus on the crimes committed by drug market actors (e.g. Jacques and Wright, 2011), while others seek to evaluate the effectiveness of targeted law enforcement operations (e.g. Corsaro et al., 2012; Kerr et al., 2005). When reviewing the mass of literature on this subject a range of reference points to what exactly is being discussed in relation to drug markets is therefore uncovered.

This is not to say there might not be some potential benefits amid this diversity. Drawing on alternative perspectives associated with other approaches has been suggested as having the potential to elevate the insights and findings based in one single perspective (Moeller, 2018b). Indeed, Ritter (2006) proposes there is great potential in inter and transdisciplinary research to advance knowledge in this area. Ultimately, however, especially when exploring a drug market development, as Dwyer and Moore (2010) note, arguably of particular importance is to recognise the limitations of dominant *homo economicus* conceptualisations of drug markets and the important role of social and cultural factors that this perspective does not capture (see also Young, 2011). Interpreting drug markets purely as sets of transactions or sites of exchange may provide intuitive appeal but this often masks or even misleads the true realities of what takes place (Stevens, 2011a). As 'informal economies' (see Beckert and Wehinger, 2013), understanding how and why they function in the way they do requires a broader focus than simply depictions as sites of exchange. The

need for methodological and theoretical approaches that allow for this would therefore appear to endure (Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009; Wakeman, 2016).

To demonstrate the importance of recognising the 'socialised' context of these environments, a number of relevant examples can be provided (Dwyer and Moore, 2010). First, contrasting with the common conceptualisation within economic models, buyers and sellers are often not anonymous to one another but may be engaged in a host of differing relationships. Interactional factors which influence the nature of these transactions that take place, such as trust, therefore become worthy of consideration (Maher et al., 1998). Second, despite operating within a market place, suppliers might not strictly conform to neo-classical understandings of market place competition, or act in ways that are driven purely by self-gain (Davis, 1992). The prominent role of 'freebies', for example, cannot be adequately understood in this manner (Jacques and Wright, 2014). Third, and building on this insight, it should not be assumed that drug market actors are making rational decisions based on the receipt of 'perfect' information (Coomber, 2004). Amid the often hazy drug market milieu, just as those commenting on them from the outside looking in may propagate myths, stereotypes and fantasies (Coomber, 2006), so too may those participating within them engage in gossip and other falsehoods that distort their realities (Dickinson and Wright, 2015). Finally, with regard to temporality, while the exchange of money and drugs can be considered at its most immediate level as a 'spot-transaction', there is of course a whole range of important phases and interactions that can take place before and after a deal takes place (Dwyer and Moore, 2010).

As opposed to narrowly conceptualising drug markets in 'undersocialised' ways (Granovetter, 1985), what in sum this emphasises is the importance of being attentive to the wider social context in which transactions occur and how, overall, markets function. Reducing these environments as simply sites of commodity exchange inherently limits understandings and the potential for analysis, especially when exploring developments and evolutions. Instead, as illustrated in the remainder of this chapter and indeed the thesis, such conceptualisations of 'the drug market' sets the scene for moving beyond considering them as homogenous entities (Coomber, 2015). Doing so provides the capacity for more nuanced insights into

those who act within them and some of the wider conditions associated with how they function (Sales and Murphy, 2007).

2.2.1 Drug market structures: Pyramids and fragmentation

Demonstrating the importance of recognising their nuances and the limitations of considering them as homogenised entities are concerns of how drug markets are structured (Wilson and Stevens, 2008; Dorn et al., 2005). This has been the subject of much debate (Dorn et al., 1992). A common perception influenced by classical understandings of organised crime (see Cressey, 1969) is that they are organised along strict hierarchical lines. The archetypal pyramid shape is evoked as illustrative of such a structure. A few powerful individuals referred to *inter alia* as 'kingpins', 'Mr Bigs' or 'big kahunas' (Gundur, 2019; Pearson and Hobbs, 2003), are understood to sit at the top and control operations. Further down are increasing numbers of actors with correspondingly less resources, authority, profit levels and market control (Wright, 2006). Serving as a useful heuristic device, Pearson and Hobbs (2001), outline four main levels of this market supply chain and the roles of those acting within it. These are namely 'importers', 'wholesalers', 'middle market drug-brokers' and 'retail level dealers'. Each role significantly differs but are, when viewed collectively, considered integral to the functioning of the overall market.

For reasons often relating to access, research has predominantly focused on the retail level - sometimes also referred to as 'street markets' - where drugs are sold to the end user (Maher and Dixon, 1999; Weisburd and Green, 1994). Understandings of those operating higher up are severely limited in comparison, although there has been some research that has ventured up the chain. Adler's (1985) ground-breaking work in the US, for example, documented the activities, motivations and lives of those involved in high levels of importation and wholesale. She found a distinct entrepreneurial spirit and business acumen among these 'upper level traffickers', but also an overwhelming commitment to hedonism fostered by the immense profits being made. Other work has highlighted the tendency for conflicts at this level to be settled without recourse to violence (Zaitch, 2005), a general reluctance to attempt to corrupt state officials compared to producers in source countries (Desroches,

2005; Dorn et al., 1998), and the binding role that ethnicity plays in many supply organisations (Kilmer and Hoorens, 2010).

Yet, while these insights indicate a recognisable hierarchy, the belief that drug markets are tightly organised in a strict pyramidal structure has been argued as misguided (Potter and Osiniagova, 2013; Ruggiero and South, 1995). Exploring this was one of the driving factors behind Dorn et al.'s (1992) landmark publication of 'Trafficker: Drug Markets and Law Enforcement'. While now over a quarter of a century old, this remains one of the most influential texts in the context of British drug market research. In particular, the authors shine considerable critical light on the realities of how markets are organised, noting:

> *"We began this research with no more than a nagging suspicion that, contrary to mythology and media presentation, domestic drug markets might not be organised as neat, top-down hierarchies controlled by a 'Mr Big'. By the time we were half way through this research, we were sure of this. At the end it no longer seems at all remarkable: no cartels; no mafia; no drug barons."* (Dorn et.al, 1992, p.x.)

As their conclusions suggest, rather than a stereotypical 'mafia-like' pyramid formation, the organisation of drug markets actually appears far more fragmented, likely comprised of a significant number of medium to small independent organisations or 'constellations' of individuals who work alongside one another and sometimes compete for market share (see also, Desrochs, 2007; Henman et al., 1985; Hallsworth, 2013). Rather than having a firm grasp of what is going on, knowledge of other dealing group's activities, or even of their existence, may be patchy (Pearson and Hobbs, 2003). As the structure is often highly flexible the roles adopted may also interchange, with certain amounts of organisational fluidity present. The aforementioned four tiers outlined by Pearson and Hobbs (2001) may not therefore always be clearly observable, with actors occupying more than one or there being multiple intermediaries between them. In addition, definitional issues also often pervade. This is especially the case in the so called 'middle market' (Akhtar and South, 2000). While lying somewhere between wholesalers and retail dealers, what constitutes this level of supply is often contested. Despite some noteworthy

attempts (e.g. Pearson and Hobbs, 2004), trying to neatly define it risks overlooking the complexities and variances that constitute the messy realities of how the drug supply world is structured (Johnson et al., 1992).

It is therefore arguably more appropriate to consider drug markets as being structured around a more loosely organised, perhaps even 'disorganised', set of entrepreneurial networks (Hobbs, 1998; Reuter, 1983). Speaking to the importance of recognising their social context, who to work and associate with are often guided as much by familial, friendship and ethnic ties as they are by instrumental decisions (Morselli, 2001; Zaitch, 2002). In relation to differential association, some studies have reported prison to be an important factor in building trust among potential associates (Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007). Others have highlighted how it can be a key generator in building networks, especially for developing contacts to facilitate cross regional collaboration (Pearson and Hobbs, 2001). Indeed, especially given that markets are not as strictly organised as stereotypically understood, exploring regional context and the variations between different areas appears particularly important (Davidson et al., 1997). The market, it is suggested, should not be viewed as a national one but rather "a series of loosely interlinked local and regional markets" (Pearson and Hobbs, 2001, p.vii). Important variations will therefore be present across different locales and often influence dealer activity (Coomber, 2015). Regional competition may influence the choice of where individuals deal, and it has also been reported that groups may collude with one another in order to fix prices or agree on dividing up geographical areas (Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007). This adds further weight to the suggestion of drug market fluidity and flexibility, as opposed to rigid levels of structure, and how external factors influence and shape the nature of such activity.

2.2.2 Retail Market Characteristics: Open, closed and transitions in-between

If the market can therefore be considered as a loose, flexible, fragmented pyramid, it is undoubtedly at the bottom, where drugs meet their final resting point with end users, that the dominant focus has been placed. Specifically, attempts have been made to highlight the specific characteristics of retail markets and how these may differ from one another. Such distinctions have commonly centred on the extent to

which they can be considered as 'open' or 'closed' (May and Hough, 2004). Open markets, as classically depicted in TV shows such as *The Wire*, are those where access to buying drugs is generally available to anyone. Prior acquaintance or introduction is not a pre-requisite to an exchange taking place (Eck, 1995). Often located in urban areas that have built a reputation for having drugs readily available (Coomber and Maher, 2006), this provides distinct commercial benefits as buyers know where to go to purchase drugs, while sellers have access to a wide customer base (Eck and Gersh, 2000; Young et al., 2006). Within such a market it is in the dealer's interest to maximise their accessibility to prospective buyers. As such, these markets will often operate in specific, relatively static geographical locations which allow buyers and sellers to efficiently locate each other (May et al., 1999; Reuter and MacCoun, 1992; Sterk and Elifson 1990). Other common characteristics include them being close to transport hubs or main arterial routes allowing for ease of access (Rengert et al., 2005). However, the advantages of open markets are also their major weakness. Being highly accessible and visible means that they are likely to engender attention and concern from local residents (Mazerolle et al., 1998). This then makes them highly vulnerable to policing (May et al., 2001).

In contrast, closed markets operate specifically to minimise the risk of law enforcement and other forms of attention. In these environments, buyers and sellers only operate and engage with those they know and trust or, at the very least, have been introduced to by a reliable third party (May and Hough, 2004). Being less visible, closed markets inherently offer the benefit of greater protection against policing (Buerger, 1992). They also typically engender greater trust and rapport among market participants and lead to less conflict (Haroscopos and Hough, 2005). Moreover, with attention paid to minimise visibility, levels of local awareness and the wider impact on the community in which it operates may be reduced in comparison to open markets (Briggs, 2013). From a commercial perspective, a weakness of this market form is that its customer base is inherently limited. Sellers are restricted as to the number of potential buyers they engage with, while buyers may simply not be able to locate a supplier. This is counterbalanced with the protection against police attention and perhaps other issues such as robbery and violence that is associated

with operating with those who are known and trusted (Topalli et al., 2002). Applied in practice, it has been considered likely that the extent to which a market is closed will be mediated by the actual or perceived risk of detection (Eck, 1995). Rather than presenting as a binary distinction, it may therefore be appropriate to view such markets on a scale of how closed they truly are (May and Hough, 2004), with the more barriers placed in front of new or potential buyers the more closed a market can be considered.

Speaking to the wider propensity for markets to evolve, one particularly notable observation in relation to this distinction has been the transition of formerly open markets into closed ones (Curtis and Wendel, 2007). While closed markets have long existed within Britain (see Pearson, 1987a), observations both in a domestic and international setting suggest open markets are increasingly rare, with closed forms now dominant. A number of explanations have been suggested as to why this has occurred. One is that it is the result of police pressure. May and Hough (2004) argue that how visible and detrimental drug markets are to local communities has been the guiding factor on how they are responded to. Increased community concerns engendering greater police attention may well have therefore provided a stimulus for markets to become more inconspicuous (Foster, 2000; Murji, 1998b). A second explanation is the key role played by wider social factors such as neighbourhood gentrification in shifting the nature of markets in certain locales (Curtis et al., 2002). In light of these changes, 'delivery' methods have been found to be popular in these areas (Curtis and Wendel, 2000). Finally, as will be discussed in more detail in relation to County Lines, the proliferation of mobile phone ownership has also been identified as a significant influence (Søgaard et al., 2019). Described as having "radically transformed retail drug markets" (May and Hough, 2004, p.554), these provide the means for easier communication and for markets to operate in a more inconspicuous manner (Barendregt et al., 2006). Combined, it is likely that these and other factors will interplay and be of varying influence across different times and places. Of wider note and importance, however, is how external factors can be guiding stimuli for change, and the general propensity for markets and their actors to adapt and evolve (Curtis and Wendel, 2007).

2.2.3 Markets on the move: The 'distance travelled' typology

Beyond where they can be considered to sit on the 'open' or 'closed' scale and their reasons for doing so, a far less discussed form of retail market distinction concerns their geographical characteristics (Lum, 2008; Rengert, 2018). More specifically, attention has begun to be placed on the relationship between market actors and the distance they travel to its location (see Johnson et al., 2013). Originally seeking to "illustrate how more detailed knowledge about street markets could help us select effective policies to combat them", Reuter and MacCoun (1992, p.236) formulated an intriguing typology which categorises retail markets in relation to the distance travelled by the dealers and buyers that populate it. Markets characterized by mostly indigenous resident dealers and buyers are described as 'local' markets. In contrast, markets in which both dealers and buyers are mostly non-residents are considered as 'public'. 'Export' markets are those where local residents sell to non-local buyers, while markets in which mostly non-resident dealers travel to sell to local populations are described as 'import' markets (see also Johnson et al., 2013).

In addition to being a further form of differentiation, it is suggested that classifying and understanding markets in this way may help provide further insight on their likely nature and characteristics (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992). In particular, while originally formulated as a means to analyse a market's vulnerability to law enforcement, the typology is suggested as being a potentially valuable tool into the study and prediction of drug market violence (Reuter, 2009). Local markets, for example, are considered as likely to be relatively peaceful due to the familiarity between buyers and dealers, and their established roles. Export markets may also have low levels of violence due to dealers seeking to make it an attractive option for buyers to travel to. However, import markets are hypothesised as likely to be more violent due to factors such as a lack of familiarity between buyers and sellers, the lack of social ties dealers have to the community and the competition for territory that may occur due to their presence (Reuter, 2009). Due to the deleterious effects that migrating dealers may have on the area that they travel to deal in, it is also suggested that this may raise particular concerns among local residents resulting in subsequent demands for police responses (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992).

Despite the distance travelled typology's potential utility in helping to highlight the differences between markets, and why some may be more prone to violence and other forms of harm, it has been the subject of little theoretical or empirical development. The one exception to this is the work of Johnson (2016) who has sought to empirically test the predictions of the typology in relation to levels of violence through statistical modelling. Although only a partial test, his findings provide some support for the hypotheses made in the formulation of the typology, with public markets found to be significantly more violent than local markets. However, in the absence of other research, current knowledge on the issue of distance travelled to markets, and the variation and nature between these different forms remains somewhat limited (Reuter, 2009). The hypothesis related to their harms and general nature of 'import' markets are of particular note. Given the importance of appreciating their complexities and 'socialised' nature there would appear to be significant scope for qualitative explorations of such markets. Because of the nature of County Lines and the focus of this thesis on local affected areas, this conceptualisation of 'import' markets therefore becomes of significant analytic value.

2.3 Who does the dealing?

Having outlined some necessary conceptual issues relating to the structure, machinations and organisation of drug markets, it is worth focusing on the actors engaged in drug supply. The underground figure of the drug dealer is bound up in discourses of 'immorality' and 'evil' (Taylor, 2008). Embodying a 'folk devil' status (Young, 1971), their activities are widely condemned by society. As Coomber (2006) suggests, apart from child abusers it is difficult to think of another figure that is subject to such emotive and widespread condemnation. Regularly depicted as unscrupulous purveyors of disorder, death and moral decline, this societal denunciation is reflected in the punitive criminal sanctions they receive (Naddelmann, 2004). In Britain, significant prison sentences are common. A conviction of supplying or offering to supply a Class A drug under section 4 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 holds a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Further afield the death sentence continues to be used, as recently illustrated by Philippine

President Robert Duterte's 'Operation Double Barrel' (Macalalad and Rayco, 2018). Yet, for all cultural reference points and constructions, it is important to look beyond dominant, reductionist stereotypes when trying to gain a true understanding of who these figures are and their motivations (Coomber, 2010; Jacques and Wright, 2015; Salinas, 2018). A range of studies have sought to shed light on those who operate in this murky underworld, uncovering significant variance among those who are both legally and culturally tarnished with the broad strokes of the 'drug pusher' brush.

One of the earliest and influential attempts to make sense of the different forms of drug supply organisations and the variety of actors that comprise them comes from Dorn et al. (1992). Building on ideas originally outlined in Dorn and South (1990), they provided a typology outlining seven different types, which speak to the varied actors involved in drug supply and their motivations. Namely, these are:

1. *Trading Charities – enterprises involved in the drug business because of ideological commitments to drugs (e.g. cannabis, Ecstasy), with profit a secondary motive;*
2. *Mutual Societies – friendship networks of user-dealers who support each other and sell or exchange drugs amongst themselves in a reciprocal fashion;*
3. *Sideliners – the licit business enterprise that begins to trade in drugs as a 'sideline';*
4. *Criminal Diversifiers – the existing criminal enterprise that 'diversifies' its operations to include drugs;*
5. *Opportunistic Irregulars – individuals or small groups who get involved in a variety of activities in the 'irregular economy', including drugs;*
6. *Retail Specialists – enterprises with a manager employing people in a variety of specialist roles to distribute drugs to users (an increasingly common 'street dealing' format);*
7. *State-sponsored Traders – enterprises that result from collaboration between control agents and others; for example, collaboration between police undercover agents and their informants who may be allowed to continue to trade; or 'buy bust' covert operations*

(Dorn et.al, 1992, pg. xiii)

While remaining a popular reference point, this typology can be considered problematic on two counts. Firstly, as the authors themselves acknowledged, it fails to represent the fluidity and complexity that their own fieldwork uncovered. Trying to neatly delineate and classify any social phenomena is replete with challenges, let alone such clandestine and complex actors as drug dealers (see Young, 2011). Secondly, it is now significantly aged. As relevant as it may have been at the time of publication it would be naive to belief that it still holds the same analytic credibility, especially given the rapid cultural, economic, technological and societal changes that have occurred over the past two decades (see Bauman, 2004; Hall et al., 2008; Hobbs, 2013; Young, 2007). What it does provide, however, is valuable insight into the diversity of those involved in drug supply. Specifically for the purposes of this narrative review, it serves as a useful heuristic device to reflect on and to situate more recent findings.

2.3.1 'A friend with weed is a friend indeed': Moral economies, user-dealers and social supply

A particularly valuable insight provided by Dorn et al.'s (1992) typology, and one which illustrates its propensity for more recent research to update understandings, is the identification of those who do not conform to stereotypical understandings of who dealers are. A clear example are those operating in groups described as 'Trading Charities' (Dorn et al., 1992). These were deemed to be particularly prevalent in what were nostalgically referred to as the 'good old days' of the 1960s. As opposed to ruthless commercialism, dealers understood in this context were those whose motivations were primarily born out of an ideological commitment to certain drugs, with profit generation a distinct secondary concern (see also Taylor and Potter, 2013). Somewhat inevitably, therefore, for Dorn et al. (1992), those engaged in this form of supply were deemed not commercially orientated. They did not have the business skills or the desire to make their enterprises more financially focused. As drug market actors, they also dismissed or actively rejected the label of 'dealer' due to the negative stereotypes and associated connotations (see also Young, 1971).

In a contemporary setting, comparisons can arguably be made between this and the more recent work of Wakeman (2016) in outlining heroin's 'moral economy'. Bound

together by heightened social exclusion, heroin and crack are suggested to be often exchanged or shared by this population and within this using culture without strict adherence to traditional monetary transactions (see also Bourgois, 1998). As with some of the insights provided by the work of Pearson (1987b) and Parker et al. (1988), those engaging in this moral economy are seen to recognise each other's addictions, the reluctance to experience withdrawal and the barriers in place to prevent them from maintaining a consistent source of supply. In turn, similar to the ideological commitment observed among 'Trading Charities' (Dorn et al., 1992), methods such as 'partnering' and 'sharing' are widely adopted to enable drugs to be supplied among networks of users that have high rates of demand but are also experiencing acute social deprivation and exclusion (Seddon, 2006).

A second form of drug supply activity originally identified by Dorn et al. (1992) that diverges from stereotypical depictions of 'the dealer' (see Coomber, 2006) are what is termed 'Mutual Societies', described as networks of users who support their use by selling or exchanging drugs with one another. This can arguably be considered as having laid the groundwork for the now burgeoning body of literature that has explored the functioning and dynamics of user-dealing and 'social supply' (Werse and Bernard, 2016). A theoretical point of departure for much of this literature is that, alongside the normalisation of certain forms of drug use (see Parker et al., 1998; Aldridge et al., 2013), so too has drug supply within social groups and between friends become relatively normalised (Coomber, 2004). Concepts such as 'drift' (Matza, 1967) and 'techniques of neutralisation' (Sykes and Matza, 1957) have been found to hold significant explanatory power for how people become involved and interpret their supply activity (see Coomber et al., 2016). Values of friendship and trust have also been seen to make violence almost non-existent (Taylor and Potter, 2013). Further highlighting the emphasis placed on differentiating those servicing these markets from more conventional understandings, some persuasive arguments on the grounds of proportionality have been made that social supply should be made a distinct offence in itself (Moyle et al., 2013).

Traditionally, those considered suitable to be categorised as user-dealers, engaging in social supply, or more generally involved in what might best be described as

'minimally commercial' levels of supply (Coomber and Moyle, 2014), have been associated with more 'recreational' substances such as cannabis and ecstasy (Coomber and Turnbull, 2007; Duffy et al., 2007). This corresponds with the wider drug normalisation thesis and how the use of such drugs fits into contemporary leisure patterns (Measham and Shiner, 2009). But, as Parker et al. (1988) recognised, notions of reciprocity and sharing that developed with regard to cannabis were quite easily extended to heroin once it became more widely used from the 1980s. Correspondingly, it has increasingly been stressed that the supply of 'problem' or 'street' drugs are also often via these forms of dealing. Moyle and Coomber (2015) found that for heroin and crack user-dealers, involvement in supply can fund their own use and often serves as a more attractive option to other methods such as acquisitive crime or sex work that might be viewed as morally questionable or harder work. Far from a homogenous group, they also noted the different forms user-dealing can take and how this interplays with more commercial markets. These varied roles include serving under a more commercial supplier as a 'dealer's apprentice', being the 'nominated buyer' for a wider group of users, or simply being an 'opportunist' when a potentially lucrative situation presents itself (Moyle and Coomber, 2015). Taken together, what these more historical and contemporary insights ultimately stress, is that not only do those supplying drugs frequently not conform to 'pusher' stereotypes (Coomber, 2006), but trying to draw clear distinctions between users, dealers, and different markets is often problematic. Even for certain drug markets considered particularly noxious such as heroin and crack, there would therefore appear to exist significant variation in them and their associated harms.

2.3.2 'Proper' drug dealers

As undoubtedly important as it is to identify the prominence of user-dealing and social supply, it must also be recognised that many of those servicing drug markets do enter them for more commercial reasons (Densley et al., 2018; Windle and Briggs, 2015b). Such actors conform to what might be thought of as drug dealing 'proper' (Coomber, 2010). Again referring back to Dorn et al.'s (1992) original typology, a range of such dealers were identified. 'Criminal Diversifiers' were described as those

already involved in illicit activity but having moved into the business of drug supply (see also Windle, 2013). Corresponding with many of those depicted by Hobbs (1988) in his classic study of London's East End, these individuals embody a spirit of wanting to do a deal or engage with an illicit market if it represents an opportunity to make profit. Another identified commercial type were 'Sideliners' (Dorn et al., 1992), who ran legitimate businesses but became involved in supplying drugs on the side. Examples of these ranged from builders who use their business as a front for profits and money laundering, to publicans who utilise their premises as a venue for drug dealing. Hobbs' (2013) more recent work would suggest that dealers fitting these categories are still very much present. However, representing a further development, also now servicing drug markets are those who combine commercially orientated drug supply alongside conventional employment. As Salinas (2018, p.226) has documented, there exists a significant yet often hidden subset of dealers who are well educated, in respectable employment but also entwine drug selling "into the fabric of conventional routines" as supplementary forms of income (see also Jacques and Wright, 2015).

Arguably of central importance when exploring the contemporary commercial drug supply landscape, however, is the burgeoning presence of socially excluded and relatively deprived actors. When tracing the infancy of this population's involvement, Dorn et al. (1992) argued that as UK drug markets became more prevalent, so too did the amount of these actors becoming engaged in drug supply. In comparison to the aforementioned 'good old days', the presence of more commercial dealers was seen to transform the climate to one where "things got nasty" (Dorn et al., 1992, p.31). It is also here, from the mid-1980s onwards, that they noted the increased involvement of ethnic minorities. Notably, not only did the proportion of this population engaged in dealing seemingly substantially increase at this time, but they also dealt in highly visible markets and in intensely policed areas, giving the impression that they were even more involved than they actually were (see also Lea and Young, 1984).

Similar to what those such as Currie (1993) traced in the US, beyond ethnicity such populations were more specifically identified as coming from deprived communities (Seddon, 2006). The opportunity to achieve material success in this way was

suggested as something that they placed a high emphasis on (Collison, 1996; Stevens, 2011b). Indeed, this trend of socially excluded populations finding refuge or being propelled into illicit drug markets appears increasingly relevant (Hall et al., 2008; Mclean et al., 2018). Under the terrain of late modernity, the entrenchment of street dealing among socially and economically marginalised groups has seemingly intensified (Densley and Stevens, 2015; Wacquant, 2008). With hollowed out inner cities offering limited job opportunities and producing heightened social exclusion (Bauman, 2004; Young, 1999), entering the drug market is argued to provide the opportunities to generate money, and all the material things it can buy, for those who may see little prospect of obtaining it through legitimate means (Hallsworth, 2005; Windle and Briggs, 2015b). The balance between serious risk and intoxicating reward can offset the monotony characteristic of a life destined to be lived on the margins (Fast et al., 2017). In turn, this can provide forms of dignity and respect that may otherwise be hard to come by (Bourgois, 2003).

2.3.3 A 'gang' problem?

When discussing the involvement of young socially excluded actors in drug dealing, a reflection on the role of gangs is necessary. British research on the subject has a rather turbulent past (see Densley, 2013; Fraser, 2015). Downes (1966) famously served to cool much empirical investigation by claiming that, in comparison to what was observable across the Atlantic, Britain did not have such identifiable groups. This was generally taken as an axiom until the turn of the century saw the 'discovery' of highly organised corporate gangs lurking in the shadows of Britain's inner cities (Pitts, 2008). Subsequently reinforced by criminology's own 'gang' of gang researchers (see Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004), a flurry of claims were made that such groups very much do exist. With high levels of organisation, identity, formal membership and engrained cultures of violence and drug dealing, this was presented as the face of contemporary youth crime. Because of the threat these groups posed it was implored by some that Britain start taking gangs 'seriously' (Pitts, 2012).

Yet, for all of its academic and wider policy popularity, this 'gangland thesis' has been robustly challenged by others in the field. Those exploring the issue in the north of England have reported less formal organisation and leadership among such groups,

finding them to be more 'fluid' and 'messy' (Aldridge et al., 2012; Smithson and Ralphs, 2016). Most strident, however, has been Hallsworth (2013), who has been particularly outspoken against the view that Britain is suffering from a gang epidemic. Constructing involvement in drug dealing and street violence as essentially a problem of gangs, he argues, is flawed on epistemological, theoretical and methodological grounds. Reducing these issues to this is instead considered 'gang talk' (Hallsworth and Young, 2008), a sensationalist discourse that overemphasises and mischaracterises their involvement in drug markets, while reducing involvement in this and other forms of crime as products of these groups and their burgeoning 'culture'. In turn, this detracts attention from underlying socio-economic conditions that drive forms of involvement in street violence and drug dealing (Hallsworth, 2014). Speaking to the pervasiveness of this discourse, some core components and familiar tropes of the 'language game' employed by gang talkers has also been identified. Key to successfully achieving this process involves a process of 'othering', as well as perhaps evoking notions of 'fear' (Coomber, 2011; Reinarman and Levine, 1989). In particular, this involves stressing their: *'novelty'; 'proliferation'; 'corporatisation'; 'weaponisation'; 'penetration'; and 'monstrousness'* (Hallsworth, 2013, p.73). Theoretically, this can therefore be considered as inducing wider conceptions of 'purity' and 'danger' (Douglas, 1966).

The gang debate continues to rage on (see Fraser, 2017), with some seeking to locate themselves in a position to both challenge and reify the insights of both (e.g. Densley 2013). For the purposes of understanding this in relation to the current state of British drug markets, what is arguably most important to note is the entrenched involvement of many of those experiencing acute social exclusion in the drug trade (Densley and Stevens, 2015; McLean et al., 2018; Windle and Briggs, 2015b). Running parallel with the legitimate job market, involvement in drug supply appears to increasingly be presenting as a form of obtainable employment. Indeed, beyond these street-based organisations a wider trend of the illicit market replacing legitimate work is visible across de-industrialised British towns and cities (Ancrum and Treadwell, 2017; Hall et al, 2008; Seddon, 2006). Ultimately, taking stock over two decades after Dorn et al.'s (1992) original evaluation of the makeup and players

involved in Britain's drug markets, familiar signs of a diverse range of actors are identifiable but notable evolutions in who is involved, their motivations and the cultures that underpin this are observable, often deriving from wider social changes.

2.4 Drug market violence and its 'systemic' nature

In addition to how they are conceptualised, structured and who operates within them, when understanding drug markets, it is essential to consider the conditions that are associated or often understood as inherent to their functioning. In particular, the presence of violence as a drug market 'externality' (Caulkins, 2002) is one that is never too far away from both academic and wider attention. The most prominent and influential account of this criminological concern comes from Goldstein (1985) who, in an attempt to shed light on the relationship between drugs and violence, provided a tripartite framework outlining the three possible etiological pathways in which they can be connected. The 'psychopharmacological' pathway concerns violence committed due to the direct intoxicating effects of the drugs themselves, while the 'economic-compulsive', encompasses violence committed by users to generate money to purchase drugs. Specifically, in the context of drug markets, however, it is the final 'systemic' pathway that is of particular interest. Acts of violence categorised under this explanation are those considered arising out of the marketing of drugs and the illicit nature of the environments in which they are bought and sold (see also Reuter, 2009).

It is within this systemic pathway that subsequent studies, including Goldstein's own, has suggested that the majority of drug related violence occurs (Blumstein, 1995; Fagan and Chin, 1990; Goldstein et al., 1989). A significant body of research has subsequently devoted itself to its study and measurement (see e.g. Baumer et al. 1998; Dickinson, 2015; Fagan and Chin, 1990; Jacobs, 2004; Seffrin and Domahidi 2014; Topalli et al., 2002). While originating in the US it has been widely adopted in British research and beyond. As Stevens (2011b) notes, such is its prominence that many academics and policy makers have referred to it without reflection or even acknowledgement of its origin (e.g. Deitch et al., 2000; Hammersley, 2008). The influence Goldstein's (1985) framework and the concept of systemic violence in

particular continues to have therefore cannot be overstated. As violence and other 'noxious' drug market conditions continue to be of such prominent concern (Caulkins and Reuter, 2009; Kleiman, 2005), a thorough appraisal of this dominant explanation of why and how it occurs therefore becomes of central importance to not only developing understandings but also considering responses.

2.4.1 Drug markets as 'virtual anarchy'?

When attempting to unpack the systemic violence explanation, it is the state of 'virtual anarchy' (Cooney, 1998) that drug markets and their participants are argued to find themselves in that is seemingly central to this account of why violence occurs. In short, due to the inherently illegal activity they are engaged in, drug market actors do not have access to the law and formal conflict resolution (Jacques and Wright, 2008). In response to these conditions, the use of violence is therefore considered an inevitability. It is worth noting that the recognition of problematic human interaction arising out of lawless environments is far from a modern concern. Seffrin and Domahidi (2014) refer back to the work of Thomas Hobbes, illustrating how his theory of human action predicts much of the violence that often appears to underscore conditions within drug markets. Specifically, it was suggested that sources of conflict, or 'causes of quarrel', are likely to arise when there is fierce competition for resources, when individuals fear for their own safety and when actors place a heightened concern on establishing and maintaining reputation (Hobbes, 1960 cited in Seffrin and Domahidi, 2014). Such conditions are often considered highly prevalent and acutely experienced in these 'virtually anarchic' environments (Jacques and Allen, 2015).

More contemporary theoretical foundations of the systemic explanation of drug market violence can be found through the work of Jacques and Wright (2008). Drawing on Black's (1983) theory of self-help they identify and seek to explain two main forms of violent behaviour present in drug markets, namely retaliation and predation. With regard to retaliation, it is argued that an individual's access to formal conflict resolution decreases correspondingly with a decrease in their social status. As drug market actors are considered likely to have low social status, especially if regularly coming into contact with the criminal justice system, they will therefore not

have access to or be willing to mobilise the formal criminal justice system (Jacques and Allen, 2015). Due to this, retaliation is instead considered the likely choice for those operating within these environments. Put simply, those participating within drug markets are suggested as far more likely to take matters into their own hands in response to victimisation, as opposed to formally reporting it. Indeed, whether their victimisation is violent or not, this retaliation will often take the form of violent means (Jacobs, 2000). A similar process, firmly rooted in the conditions of a lawless marketplace, is also outlined in regard to predatory violence (Jacques and Wright, 2008). Drug users and dealers are viewed as being attractive targets of predation, not just because they are likely to be in possession of money and/or drugs, but because they will also be highly unlikely to call on the criminal justice system in response to their victimisation (Jacobs et al., 2000). Drug dealers who are the victims of robbery, for example, are highly unlikely to report this to the police due to fear of drawing attention to their illegal behaviour or the belief that they will not be helped (although see Jacques and Wright 2013 for discussions of when this has occurred). Underpinned by the pervading conditions of being an illegal market place, the systemic pathway would therefore appear to provide a clear theoretical foundation for explaining the presence of drug market violence.

2.4.2 A blinkered concept? Empirical and theoretical limitations

Yet, despite its widespread acceptance, popularity and use to situate empirical findings on drug market violence, the systemic explanation has been the subject of significant critique. Following some of the arguments already made in this chapter, this issue is also one that requires more nuance and benefits from variance being recognised. A fundamental criticism of the systemic explanation is its lack of empirical foundation. In a thorough critique, Stevens (2011b) shows how Goldstein et al.'s (1989) own empirical test and widely accepted validation of the explanation was deeply flawed. First, the study was based in New York during the 1980s, a time and place widely recognised as having atypically high levels of drug related violence due to the specific social conditions and instability of their crack cocaine markets (Brownstein et al., 2000; Coomber, 2015). Second, the methodology comprised of asking police officers to record their impressions of murders over a set time period.

Over half were interpreted as being drug related and these incidents were then, Stevens (2011b) argues, reductively 'shoehorned' into the three pathways, despite their specific details often bearing little resemblance to the pathways in which they were placed. As an illustration of this, all of the murders that could not be classified as economic-compulsive or psychopharmacological were automatically placed in the systemic category. Rather than being a rigorous test of the framework, this study instead appears to have been an exercise in proving it (Stevens, 2011b). By taking in all those incidents that did not conform to the other two pathways, the systemic explanation was also left lacking clarity, detail or appropriate scrutiny.

These methodological issues undermining the legitimacy of the systemic pathway as a holistic explanatory concept can be considered compounded by some of its theoretical limitations. In particular, the assumptions it makes regarding the very nature of drug markets appear to be overstated (Hammersvik, 2015). One of the fundamental tenants to the systemic explanation is the notion that drug markets are intrinsically violent (Goldstein, 1985). As noted in relation to the concept of 'virtual anarchy', violence is considered an inevitable consequence of their illegal status. Increasingly, however, evidence suggests that such reasoning is flawed. Reuter (2009) has argued that the majority of drug markets are generally peaceful for the majority of the time. As previously outlined, markets dominated by social supply and user dealing are considered to display minimal levels of violence (Coomber and Moyle, 2014; Taylor and Potter, 2013; Wakeman, 2016). Similarly, the 'distance travelled typology' suggested variation across different retail settings, with import markets considered likely to be more violent than 'local' ones (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992). Notably, even markets with a specific reputation for being particularly violent have been found to be relatively violence-free when studied in detail (Coomber and Maher, 2006). With regard to the interactions within them, it has also been stressed that conflict resolution outside of formal legal proceedings does not automatically lead to violence. Specifically with regard to when retaliation and predation occur, they commonly manifest in a host of often non-violent forms (Jacques and Wright, 2008). More broadly, disputes among drug market actors frequently involve adopting

strategies such as negotiation, avoidance or simply toleration (see Adler, 1985; Jacques and Wright, 2014).

While not overlooking its fundamental guiding influence, rather than the illegal context and lack of recourse to conflict resolution making violence an inevitability, drug market violence therefore appears more complex and contextual (Coomber, 2015). Moving away from the systemic pathway and replacing it with a 'lifestyle' pathway has been suggested as potentially beneficial (Bennett and Holloway, 2009). This would appear to open the door for consideration of the idiosyncrasies of specific markets, supply methodologies and cultures in the use of violence, rather than being limited to the context of prohibition (Sommers and Baskin, 1997). As those such as Young (2011) have stressed, violence, or any human agency for that matter, does not occur in a cultural vacuum. Just as some may place a high emphasis on the use and acceptance of violence, some will not (Johnson et al., 2000). Beyond market instrumentalities, such acts can also be viewed as 'expressive', linked to concepts such as identity, status, reputation and masculinity (Copes et al., 2015). Noting the presence of non-violent interactions within drug markets also helps to provide a broader appreciation and understanding of the true realities of these environments (Jacques and Wright, 2008). Rather than falling back onto the analytically blunt, deterministic systemic explanation (Seddon, 2006), doing so can provide a sharper focus as to the reasons why it might be particularly prevalent. The recognition of the genuine potential for the presence of peace also poses as a way of understanding why there may be differences present across different drug market environments in their propensity for violence, stressing the value of potential responses that recognise the often-significant variance across different market contexts and how some may be more problematic than others.

2.5 Conclusion

Setting a suitable foundation for the remainder of the thesis, this chapter has provided critical insight into some of the key conceptual ideas, debates and perspectives surrounding drug markets, focusing specifically on their structure, the actors involved and the presence of violence. Because of their subterranean nature,

drug markets are hidden from view and often difficult to fully appreciate and understand. Consequently, distortion, exaggeration, myths and the reliance on stereotypes abound (Coomber, 2006; Hallsworth, 2013; Reinarman and Levine, 1989). However, digging below the surface, it becomes clear that these are complex, multifaceted and sometimes contested areas. Those acting within them may not conform to conventional perceptions or display motivations rooted in *homo economicus* conceptualisations (Dwyer and Moore, 2010). Similarly, the use of violence and other related harmful conditions may not be an inevitability of their illegal nature, but a product of cultural influences, social conditions and more specific market machinations.

While inevitable and often striking similarities are visible across time and place, evolutions and adaptations in their characteristics are a consistent and important observation. Arguably fundamental is the recognition that how markets operate is rooted in social conditions and cultural influences (Briggs and Monge Gamero, 2016). Indeed, it is in direct response to these, as well as other influences, that markets and their actors evolve. While operating in a shady underworld, they cannot be interpreted as being removed from society or operating in a cultural vacuum. This suggests that when considering any seemingly new drug market development and the associated responses, it is vital to do so in relation to social contexts but also established conceptual drug market reference points. For the purposes of this thesis, doing so provides important conceptual grounding for the following chapter, and the wider exploration into the specific development of County Lines.

3.0 Evolutions in provincial British crack and heroin markets: The emergence of County Lines

3.1 Introduction

Having critically outlined some of the key concepts associated with drug markets, this chapter specifically focuses on the topic of County Lines, a significant development at the retail level of heroin and crack markets in provincial areas of the UK, and the empirical focus of the thesis. Given the vast amount of coverage this issue has received over recent years, County Lines has become not just a high-profile UK drug market development but a wider crime problem of national significance (Coliandris, 2015; Robinson, et al., 2018). As briefly outlined in the introductory chapter, at the most fundamental level it involves the migratory practices of drug supply networks who, plying their trade in the sale of the 'problem' drugs of heroin and crack, move from major urban conurbations to establish retail operations in provincial satellite areas. Labelled as operating under the banner of 'County Lines' and conforming to a distinct supply methodology, the activities of these groups are argued to have sparked something of an evolution in the way that many street level markets of these drugs now operate in Britain (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; NCA, 2017). This chapter provides a thorough narrative overview and critical insight into the phenomenon. It reviews the limited body of academic literature available on the subject, but also draws on other valuable sources such as official documents and credible journalistic work to help shed light on the issue. Being a recent development, and because relatively little has been written on the subject, this will inevitably be somewhat descriptive in parts. This can be justified on two main grounds. First, as this subject serves as the backbone of the thesis it is necessary to outline it in sufficient detail.

Second, because it is a recent development and area of study there is value of drawing together all that is currently known about the issue as a baseline exercise.

The chapter begins by providing a short discussion on the etymology of the term. This also serves as a point of clarification, highlighting areas of confusion and seeking to settle on what is meant when the term is used in the remainder of the thesis. Drawing on influential official publications it then seeks to trace the phenomenon's emergence and development. Analysing these documents is argued to provide valuable, albeit partial, insight into law enforcement understandings and presentations of the issue. Focusing on the small body of academic literature on the subject, a discussion is provided on some of the explanations as to why this drug market development has occurred, highlighting the centrality of the concept of 'market saturation'. Contrasting with the section on how the emergence of County Lines has officially been depicted and understood, a critical gaze is trained on just how novel the phenomenon is. Providing some important detail into the functioning of the groups who adopt this supply methodology the chapter then outlines and discusses what have been identified as the key actors involved and what their role in the model is. Finally, the chapter critically reviews the association between County Lines and the exploitation of vulnerable populations. This chiefly revolves around two main issues, the involvement of young people and the exploitation of local adult populations.

3.2 What's in a name? The etymology of 'County Lines'

As a starting point it is important to clarify the etymology of this neologism. This is important given its prominence and now widespread adoption in mainstream discourse, but also serves to clarify its continued usage throughout the thesis. It is worth recognising that the term 'County Lines' was originally ascribed by those in law enforcement, first appearing in a National Crime Agency assessment report (see NCA, 2015). Now common within popular parlance, the fact that it originates from senior criminal justice officials rather than being coined or even necessarily recognised by those actually undertaking the activity is of note as it highlights how the establishment and construction of the issue is rooted in official law enforcement

understandings and representations. However, this is not to say that those who have coined the term have created something of dubious ontological standing. Instead, in more informal drug specific or 'street' vernacular, those engaged in such outreach supply practices have been found to describe it using a range of terms including *inter alia*: *'OT' (out there)*; *'going country'*; *'cunch'*; *'working the lines'* and *'trappin'* (Robinson et al., 2018; Storrod and Densley, 2017; Windle and Briggs, 2015a).

To add to this potential for confusion, the true meaning of the formal 'County Lines' term has also been the subject of misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Perhaps understandably given the nomadic nature of the activity, some have interpreted it as referring to drugs being physically moved across geographical county borders (see Spectator, 2018). The true meaning of the term as originally posed, however, derives from the core role of a single phone number or 'line' to facilitate this outreach drug supply methodology (NCA, 2016). Resonant with some of Densley's (2013) findings on gang activity in London, this use of a dedicated phone line is deemed central to the overall operation and business model, serving as the necessary connection between the local drug using customers and the urban supplier seeking to service them within their locale (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). Understandings of the typical functioning of this supply methodology suggest local customers residing in a provincial town place orders to this phone number, generally consisting of small retail amounts such as the £10 'wraps' corresponding to 0.1 grams of heroin or a rock of crack (Drugwise, 2016). Usually residing in their home city, those managing the phone line subsequently relay these orders back to those physically stationed in the satellite area and holding the drugs, providing information of where and when to meet for the transaction to take place (NCA, 2016).

Referring to a 'County Line' therefore relates to the distinct phone line that is closely managed and fundamental to how the drug supply methodology is enabled. Corresponding to that discussed in the previous chapter regarding the influence of mobile phones in the operation of street level drug markets (Natarajan et al., 1995), this would therefore appear to be further evidence of their prominence in street level drug markets, but also how their presence can influence and enable evolutions in market organisation and function. In the context of County Lines, the way this is

utilised via an 'outreach methodology' also demonstrates how it interplays with the establishment and successful functioning of an 'import' market (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992). In addition, these phone lines are suggested as being 'branded' by the group (NCA, 2017). This further suggests something of an evolution from a phone number simply associated with an individual, as has traditionally been observed at the retail level (May and Hough, 2004).

Yet, despite its drug supply phone line origins, the term 'County Lines' has also increasingly been used more generally to refer to a 'phenomenon', a specific form of criminal activity and to the groups involved. This trend again appears to have derived from criminal justice agent parlance but has also subsequently permeated out to, and been reinforced by, other practitioners and the public amid intense media coverage. Perhaps owing to these multiple meanings, a concrete definition for County Lines has not been forthcoming. However, official law enforcement literature has outlined core components that make up a "typical county lines scenario" (NCA, 2017, p.2.) These include:

a. A group (not necessarily affiliated as a gang) establishes a network between an urban hub and county location, into which drugs (primarily heroin and crack cocaine) are supplied.

b. A branded mobile phone line is established in the market, to which orders are placed by introduced customers. The line will commonly (but not exclusively) be controlled by a third party, remote from the market.

c. The group exploits young or vulnerable persons, to achieve the storage and/or supply of drugs, movement of cash proceeds and to secure the use of dwellings (commonly referred to as cuckooing).

d. The group or individuals exploited by them regularly travel between the urban hub and the county market, to replenish stock and deliver cash.

e. The group is inclined to use intimidation, violence and weapons, including knives, corrosives and firearms."

(NCA, 2017, p.2)

Because of this, the term can therefore be considered to have transcended its original reference to a phone line, denoting a more general supply methodology, the groups involved, and the associated activities and drug market conditions. It should not be overlooked that the lack of concrete definition, occasional elements of confusion and layers of complexity may at times be problematic. Yet, as illustrated by the detailed outline provided by the NCA and the general understanding observable in the relevant academic literature (e.g. Robinson et al., 2018; Whittaker et al., 2019) there would appear to be a relatively unproblematic consensus around what the term 'County Lines' means. At the very least, and to avoid getting unhelpfully bogged down in semantics, adopting this wider understanding provides a useful starting point for inquiry into it as a drug supply methodology and a foundation for further analysis and exploration. Using it as a reference point, the remainder of this chapter will critically discuss these areas considered as 'common' to a County Lines drug market scenario.

3.3 Tracing the phenomenon's (official) development

When tracing the rise of County Lines to prominence and its subsequent development, a series of annual reports published by the National Crime Agency (NCA) on the topic serve as invaluable sources of information, especially given the paucity of academic research in the area. Analysing these is particularly useful in exploring how the issue has developed over just a short time period. Because of their influence and high-profile nature, with many practitioners, politicians, researchers and media outlets basing their understanding of the issue primarily on their contents (Robinson et al., 2018), these publications also provide a valuable, albeit partial, window into how it has been understood and represented by law enforcement. In 2015 the NCA first identified County Lines as an emerging 'criminal business model' and sought to draw attention to the issue as one of concern for front line practitioners (NCA, 2015). Drawing on intelligence returns from police forces and supplementing this with information from others such as the Home Office Gang and Youth Violence team, it outlined the key features of the drug supply methodology, proposed some potential links with issues such as prison release locations for how targeted markets are selected and established, and confirmed heroin and crack as

the principal substances being supplied. It also noted the diverse names used to describe such groups by different police forces at that time, including, for example, 'Dangerous Dealer Network' (NCA, 2015, p.2). County Lines activities were reported as manifesting across at least seven police force regions, with 181 different groups identified and London being by far their most popular origin. Relatively affluent commuter towns with amenable, short transport links to England's capital city were noted as popular destinations. Also suggested as being popular, however, were coastal and market towns further afield, and in particular those with high levels of deprivation and unemployment. Violence was considered to be common, with this reportedly being used by these groups when infiltrating and dominating a new market, as well as when different groups were competing for business.

In a follow-up national briefing a year later that sought to refresh an understanding of the threat and inform the *Ending Gang Violence & Exploitation* government initiative, the NCA (2016) provided further detail into the drug supply model, as well as its nature and scale. Illustrating a clear development from the previous briefing, it was reported that 71% of police forces were now experiencing such dealing practices with 12% reporting an 'emergent picture' (NCA, 2016, p.5). The regularity of travel of these groups between exporting hubs and importing locations to 'restock' and transport money was highlighted, as was the observation that generally only a small number of members were ever present in the import area at one time. If a larger presence did occur this was understood to typically indicate an attempt by these groups to 'show strength' or in response to local conflict. There was also some suggestion that these groups may be supplying drugs of high purity. Corresponding to understandings outlined in the previous chapter of the supply chain being more fragmented than rigidly organised, it was speculated that this might be an indication of the groups having access to higher volume of direct import supplies, being a tactic to dominate the market or that the markets they operate in have a demand for high levels of purity (NCA, 2016, p.7). Building on the occurrence of violence outlined in the previous report, the prevalence of the use or more general presence of weapons was also specifically noted. Knives were suggested as the most popular, but other

weapons including baseball bats, hammers, boiling water and Tasers were cited as having been used in provincial areas (NCA, 2016, p.11).

This second official report also included some illuminating demographic information on those involved. Groups originating from London, still regarded as the most popular 'exporting' hub, were described as 'predominantly Black British or Afro Caribbean' (NCA, 2016, p.6). Those from Liverpool and Manchester were described as often being White, while those from Birmingham were most frequently reported to be of Asian ethnicity. While members of these groups were described as overwhelmingly young males and therefore corresponding to longstanding observations of drug dealing being a 'man's world' (Adler, 1993; Fleetwood, 2015), this report also noted the occasional involvement of females in County Lines activity. It was suggested that their involvement sometimes took the form of peripheral or minor enabling roles in the supply model, or that it stemmed from being in some form of relationship with the male members. Again, highlighting a development from the earlier report, some potential links with Child Sexual Exploitation were also made. While recognising that this was "not a driving factor" (NCA, 2016, p.10) in the County Lines methodology and far from being widely reported, some crossovers did appear to exist between those involved in this form of supply and sexual exploitation.

Further updates and assessments were made in the third NCA report in 2017 and most recent short report in 2018, with a particular emphasis placed on highlighting new or emerging trends (NCA, 2017; 2018). At the end of 2017 it was suggested that at least 88% of police forces (corresponding to 38 forces in total) reported County Lines activity (NCA, 2017). The year after, the NCA went further to say that they now believed County Lines to be present in some form in all England and Wales force areas (NCA, 2018). Of particular note, especially given the numbers of lines reported to be operating in the first assessment, was the estimation of at least 720 different groups currently operating nationwide in 2017. This was suggested as being a 'conservative estimate' (NCA 2017, p.8), and seemingly confirming this, by 2018 the number of known County Lines was reported as being around 2000 (NCA, 2018).

Beyond the numbers of lines and those involved, these most recent reports also provide data on other trends and developments. Violence and the use of weapons

continued to be an issue of significant concern. 18 forces reported County Lines related homicides and 'turf wars' were suggested as often fuelling this (NCA, 2017 p.11). Links to firearms were also frequently made, although there were no reported incidents of one being discharged in relation to County Lines activity. With regard to profit levels, it was estimated that "a typical line can make in the region of £3,000 per day with some more prominent lines possibly making in excess of £5,000" (NCA, 2017, p.17). As these groups are operating at the retail level servicing end users, such figures suggest them being highly active, perhaps shedding further light as to why travel between areas is so frequent but also a readiness to operate at all hours of the day. Relatedly, given the relatively small amount of drugs that members were ever seemingly in possession of in satellite markets (see Drugwise, 2016), it was suggested that there had been minimal impact on profit margins when successful arrests and seizures were made by local police forces. Rather than this making a significant dent on these group's profits, it was reported as being passed down as a debt to the individual holding the drugs who would then have to "work it off" (NCA, 2017, p.18). Links with legitimate business were also hypothesised, including suspicions that some fast food outlets, taxis and care hire companies may be complicit in facilitating those involved and helping them distance themselves from their criminality. While rail was reported as being the most popular mode of transportation, it was suggested that hire cars were increasingly used, potentially as a response to increased police attention.

While being mindful of their limitations and the data they are based on, these influential official reports therefore provide valuable insight into the County Lines phenomenon, shining light on how the groups who use this outreach supply methodology operate, the associated issues and how this might relate to previous understandings of drug market structures. Because of the demographic data they also provide partial insight into who these groups are comprised of. Taken chronologically it is also possible to identify how, in just a short space of time, the phenomenon has developed and evolved. Not only has there seemingly been an explosion in the numbers of groups operating, but highlighting issues raised in the previous chapter regarding how markets adapt and respond to police pressure and

other conditions (Curtis and Wendel, 2007), evolutions in how it is undertaken and facilitated are also apparent. With regard to the wider recognition of the issue, such is the stark message these publications provide, with not just the prevalence of Class A drug supply, but also clear associations with violence and others harms, this also sets the scene for it to be responded to robustly. County Lines has therefore also been alluded to within other official polices and publications, including the Government's latest drug strategy (HM Government 2017), as well as being placed front and centre as a key priority for police forces.

3.4 County Lines as 'chronocentrism'?

As useful as these official publications are, as with any criminological phenomenon that 'explodes' on the scene and generates high levels of media and political attention, there will inevitably be suspicions that it may not be quite as new as is being portrayed. As the legacy of many moral panics has demonstrated, this is perhaps especially pertinent for issues concerning such issues as gangs and drugs, and where law enforcement and media portrayals are central in shaping understandings (see Hallsworth, 2013; Murji, 1998a; Young, 1973). More generally, so called 'drug scares' (Reinarman and Levine, 1989) have been a common observation in western societies for many decades, with drugs, those who use them and their markets found to be a suitable outlet for the diversion of fear and anger (see also Coomber, 2006; 2011). As a discipline, criminology has also been argued to have something of a short memory. Rock (2005) famously lamented the tendency for criminologists to engage in 'chronocentrism', generally ignoring anything written over fifteen years prior. This therefore leads to the discipline being in an almost perpetual state of declaring new beginnings and searching for something new and distinctive. Because of this, it would seem important to critically examine just how 'novel' County Lines is. This might also be considered particularly relevant given that the NCA, who have been the chief proponents of the phenomenon, are a relatively new agency themselves.

Applying this critical gaze to the contents of the official NCA (2015; 2016; 2017; 2018) reports, it could, for example, be suspected that the vast increase in the number of

the groups identified and the number of force areas reporting activity is, at least in part, a result of increased recognition of the practice. With it being given a formal, well publicised name and with police forces actively tasked with looking for and reporting such activity, there would appear a strong likelihood that the data reported have been as much a product of this as they are a true indication of the realities of this burgeoning crime model. To shine further light on this, exploring avenues beyond academia and official publications are useful. Investigative drug journalist Max Daly, for example, has suggested that the practice has been going on longer than commonly presented. Allusions to the outreach supply methodology are made in his book '*Narcomania*' (Daly and Sampson, 2012). More specifically, he has also provided evidence of the infancy of outreach supply practices similar to that of the County Lines phenomenon occurring almost a decade ago in select areas such as Brighton (Daly, 2018).

This suggests there are reasons for believing that County Lines, certainly in the way that it has often been presented in the media (e.g. ITV News, 2016), is perhaps not quite as new as might be assumed. That noted, there would appear to be strong evidence to suggest that over recent years it has become a significant development, marking an evolution in how crack and heroin are being retailed and changing the face of much of these markets across the UK (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). As noted in the previous chapter, drug dealers being outwardly mobile, transporting drugs from major urban hubs to smaller towns and migrating to other areas is not a wholly novel phenomenon in itself (Dorn et al. 1992). Markets for crack and heroin have of course long existed in areas outside of major urban conurbations (Pearson, 1987b). However, the evidence from the body of previous drug market research reviewed in the previous chapter suggests that migratory dealers have traditionally operated at the 'middle market' level (Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007; Pearson and Hobbs, 2001), selling wholesale weights to low-level local dealers and networks of user-dealers who then supply crack and/or heroin to end consumers (May and Hough, 2004; Moyle and Coomber, 2015). As Coomber and Moyle (2018, p.2) note: "Until very recently, none of the historic UK local drug market research referred to anything other than indigenous street-level distribution and simply assumed that to be 'how

it was done'". Speaking to the varied levels of the market outlined in the previous chapter, the novel aspect of the County Lines supply model therefore is the establishment of entrenched retail operations in targeted areas and the sustained presence of foreign dealers in provincial locales operating firmly at the street level market and interacting with local customers (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). While those such as Daly (2018) are right to point out that there may have been some precedent of its existence in the past, the scale and frequency of County Lines operations across the UK would appear to warrant it being considered a genuine and intensifying market development (Andell and Pitts, 2017; Drugwise, 2016).

3.5 A product of saturation?

If it is therefore to be argued that, while perhaps not quite as new as often portrayed, County Lines represents a genuine drug market evolution, an inevitable question that arises is what the drivers are behind it. One of the most persuasive arguments has been that the answer may lie, at least in part, in the 'saturated' conditions of the crack and heroin markets in the major cities where these groups originate from (Windle and Briggs, 2015a). Corresponding with discussions made in the previous chapter regarding the cohort of commercially orientated actors now involved in drug supply, this concept rests on the argument that there are increasingly more relatively deprived young males seeking to enter drug markets in these often claustrophobic major urban conurbations as dealers (Densley et al., 2018). Of these, the 'new breed' of marginalised inner-city young people increasingly associating themselves with the so-called 'gang' lifestyle of which servicing street markets is a major component, would appear to be highly prominent (Densley and Stevens, 2015; Mclean et al., 2018). Exacerbating this saturation, this apparent increase in the numbers of young commercial dealers has not corresponded with an increase in the number of users (Ruggiero, 2010). Although some recent data indicate an increase in prevalence of crack use (Home Office, 2019), broadly speaking there has been a historical reduction in heroin use, combined with an ageing user cohort (Beynon et al., 2007; EMCDDA, 2017). In short, therefore, there would appear to be more dealers entering into what are likely shrinking markets in their local urban areas, potentially further exacerbated if users are increasingly able to source their supply from more socially based 'closed

market' networks (May and Hough, 2004). In the face of this saturation, it would appear that dealers are responding by establishing 'import' markets (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992) outside of their immediate locale.

To some, this burgeoning outreach practice may come as little surprise. Retrospectively examining relevant findings detailing the conditions of markets in major inner cities appear to provide indications of increased saturation and associated itinerant responses. Of particular note is the work of Hales and Hobbs (2010) who, almost a decade ago, provided a case study of one specific London borough's drug market. They reported that it was coming close to the point of saturation, suggesting that "market growth may have reached a natural limit" (Hales and Hobbs, 2010, p.14). In response to this, the more entrepreneurial dealers from the borough were becoming more mobile, with a 'willingness to travel' to other areas and service other markets. What they may well therefore have been describing was the infancy of the County Lines phenomenon, or at least some of the conditions and market responses that now appear to have become widespread and intensified. Also illustrating this precedent for retail supplier mobility, Coomber and Moyle (2018) have outlined several types of 'out of town' dealers that their research has uncovered operating in areas outside of their immediate locale. In addition to the archetype County Lines dealers who occupy a more permanent presence, others who have migrated out from their immediate inner-city markets include 'commuters' who make daily trips to service an import market, and 'holidayers' who will stay over for just two or three days.

In addition to conditions of urban market saturation, further factors have also been proposed as to why the County Lines methodology has become so popular. A somewhat related driver is that the provincial 'host' towns are considered highly attractive due to the ample supply of accessible customers situated within them (Robinson et al., 2018). Making allusions with legitimate contemporary business practices, Coomber and Moyle (2018) suggest that County Lines can be understood as evocative of neoliberal market rationality and the type of moral order associated with companies such as *Amazon*, where new markets and customers are ruthlessly taken over. Combined with this is the perception of comparatively less challenging

competition from local drug dealers who may be unwilling or unable to mount a response to those seeking to lay claim to their turf (Andell and Pitts, 2017). Perceived increased anonymity within these areas has also been suggested as attractive, with members of these groups not as well known by local police, especially in comparison to officers in their origin city (NCA 2016; Whittaker et al., 2019). There have also been suggestions that the group's perceive the police in their host towns as being generally less capable and able to apprehend them (Andell and Pitts, 2017). Adopting the 'push and pull' factors model of criminal mobility developed by Morselli et al. (2011), County Lines would appear to be a result of the market saturation 'pushing' them out of their immediate locale, and some of the real or perceived conditions in foreign towns 'pulling' them into provincial areas. In turn, because of the role and presence of these range of factors, the development of County Lines would appear to correspond to the range of social and market specific factors discussed in the previous chapter that have regularly been identified as instigating market transition and evolution (Curtis and Wendel, 2007; May and Hough, 2004).

3.6 The structure of County Lines groups

Having outlined its development and some of the surrounding explanations, it is worth exploring who these networks comprise of, their structure and how they can be conceptualised. From what little is known about the operations and inner workings of those that utilise this drug supply methodology, those involved can generally be considered well organised. With regard to structure, it would appear that fundamental to how they successfully operate is as part of a relatively well-structured group, organisation or network (Robinson et al., 2018). Illustrating the pervasiveness of the 'gang talk' discourse (Hallsworth and Young, 2008), this observable grouping of actors in the undertaking of illegal activity has often led to them being labelled as a 'gang'. The media and politicians have, perhaps inevitably, adopted this parlance (e.g. Telegraph, 2018), but so too at times have official publications (e.g. NCA, 2016). Of course, while remaining attentive to the pervasiveness of 'gang talk' there might be some truth to this. The work of Densley (2013) and Whittaker et al. (2019) would suggest that inner city 'street collectives' who may well correspond or formally identify with 'gang' labels themselves are likely

to be involved as they develop as organisations, perhaps rising up the levels of the drug market pyramid. However, other entrepreneurial groups and loosely structured organisations who do not approximate the notion of 'gang' also appear to engage in drug supply operations that correspond to the County Lines model (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). As the NCA (2017, p.2) have themselves noted, such groups engaged in this activity and the actors within them may not necessarily be 'gang affiliated'. Posing as a useful way of mitigating these issues, Coomber and Moyle (2018) therefore promote the term 'out of town' dealers.

Beyond how these groups can be conceptualised, in an attempt to provide insight into the structure of County Lines groups and how this relates to the way they engage in drug supply, Coomber and Moyle (2018) identify three core roles occupied by the actors involved. It is argued that each of these are fundamental to the facilitation of this itinerant criminal business model. Illustrating a consistency with the more traditional understandings of drug supply mechanics, these roles and functions also conform to the notion discussed in the previous chapter of drug supply groups being organised in a recognisably, although not necessarily strictly, hierarchical structure (Matrix Knowledge Group 2007; May and Hough 2004; Windle and Briggs 2015b). Operating at the upper end of a County Lines hierarchy, and commanding respect and deference from those lower down (see Whittaker et al., 2019), are those described as 'Top Boys', or alternatively 'Main Man' or 'Big Boss' (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). Given how a functioning County Line is typically understood to operate, it is these individuals who tend to remain in their native cities and manage the phone line at the supply end, receiving the orders from local customers and relaying them back to those stationed in the satellite area. This physical distance helps shield them from law enforcement attention, as well as the often-harsh realities of street level crack and heroin markets, likely therefore presenting as particularly appealing. Yet, as Coomber and Moyle's (2018) findings suggest, despite this distance, they often have a highly active role in closely monitoring or even micromanaging the enterprise and day-to-day performance of those undertaking the street labour from afar (see also Storrod and Densley, 2017). Despite the clear benefits of establishing this distance, they may also not always be completely

physically removed from the satellite location. Instead, on occasions they may be present in the area to perform a role related to the local market their operating in or their group's organisation.

The second identified core role is performed by those described as 'Sitters' (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). With regard to the group structure, these individuals are suggested as being lower ranking members of the organisation and typically of younger age to the 'top boys' orchestrating the activities of the line. A fundamental difference between them is that, while both originate from the urban export areas, it is the 'sitters' who will often be resident for prolonged periods in the host towns. Taking their orders from those above them, their main role is to manage the day to day dealing operation taking place in the satellite area. They therefore engage in the physical movement and restocking of heroin and crack from the urban base to the more rural supply hub, sometimes perform driving duties and generally manage the drug distribution in the 'colonised' community (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). Varied time periods situated in the foreign locale are suggested as being undertaken by 'sitters' from just a few weeks to many months, and they generally spend their days inconspicuously, staying hidden inside local premises (Coomber and Moyle, 2018).

Further demonstrating the apparent typical hierarchy in a County Line network, the sitter's perhaps most important responsibility is to manage and organise the activities of those at the lowest levels of the supply chain who do the drug 'running'. This third and final key role of 'runner' is one that, in addition to being identified in relation to County Lines (see Robinson et al. 2018; Windle and Briggs, 2015a), has significant precedent and is widely familiar in the drug market literature (see e.g. Gilman and Pearson, 1991). Given that those using the County Lines methodology are retail level operations, their success relies on being able to efficiently service the local heroin and crack using population. It is these actors, therefore, who are actively tasked with undertaking the street level face-to-face drug dealing or 'serving up' to the end user (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). While operating at the very lowest end of the County Lines hierarchy, they are a central resource as without them there would ultimately be no business. Reported as working in a manner reminiscent of being 'on call' for hours on end, those undertaking the running receive the orders relayed back

from those in control of the line and physically distribute the product to customers (Storrod and Densley, 2017). Because of this activity and their position within the wider County Line set-up, they are in many ways taking the most risk but for the least gains (Robinson et al., 2018). Whether they be 'gangs', 'groups', 'networks' or any other collective, the explication of these roles shines light on those involved, their organisation and how this facilitates the supply methodology.

3.7 County Lines harms: The involvement of young people

The recognition of the essential role of runners leads into a key area of harm relating to this drug supply methodology. As indicated by the contents of the "typical county lines scenario" (NCA, 2017, p.2) outlined earlier in the chapter, beyond drug supply, central to discourses surrounding County Lines has been the use of violence and the exploitation of individuals described as 'vulnerable' to facilitate the servicing of these import markets (see e.g. HM Government, 2017). The outreach methodology is argued to be a supply model that thrives on exploitation, serving to distance the more powerful senior perpetrators and garner them protection from the law (Coliandris 2015). One of the chief areas of this has been who undertakes the 'running' duties for these groups. Of particular note is that County Lines runners are often very young (APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, 2017). Indeed, arguably the dominant reason why the issue has developed such high levels of attention has been the reported widespread involvement of young people, with many regularly found to be working for or as part of these groups in areas far from their home residence (Robinson et al., 2018; Windle and Briggs, 2015a).

Almost exclusively originating from the group's native city (Windle and Briggs 2015a), social media has been suggested as a key way in which young people become involved. Further illustrating how technology can serve to influence and evolve the nature of drug markets and how they function, Storrod and Densley (2017) uncovered their often-conspicuous presence on various online platforms, identifying the use of hashtags such as '#goingcnt' and '#Backondamotorway', sometimes accompanied by images of money supposedly generated by being a County Lines runner. This, they argue, illustrates the interplay between the 'expressive' activities

of those involved, with the 'instrumental' concerns of the supply model. Because of such findings it might be suggested that these young people, having weighed up the risks of involvement in drug supply, are demonstrating agency in response to their structural conditions, engulfed in a process of 'subterranean structuration' (Densley and Stevens, 2015) and making a cognisant commercial decision to enter this world of the 'street casino' (Harding, 2014) due to the potential to make money expeditiously.

However, a somewhat alternative perspective has been presented on the reasons behind this population's involvement. As Robinson et al. (2018, p.4) note:

> *"Current discourses surrounding the exploiters and exploited involved in County Lines portray a helpless victim that has been forced against his or her will into a life of criminality by a ruthless, violent gang member"*

Rather than making an informed and criminally culpable choice it has therefore been suggested that the involvement of young people can be explained as being a result of them being 'coerced' or subjected to a form of grooming (NCA, 2016). The 'elders' in control of the line are argued to 'prey' on them to enlist them into their ranks. Making comparisons between youth involvement in County Lines and cases of Child Sexual Exploitation, some have even suggested that it could represent the 'next grooming scandal' (see BBC News, 2019). As such, it has been suggested that the young people involved in County Lines should be viewed as victims of Child Criminal Exploitation, with such a process defined as:

> *"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 into any criminal activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or (c) through violence or the threat of violence. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual."* (HM Government, 2018, p.8)

A critical and sober appreciation of young people's involvement would likely be of use. Regardless, undoubtedly a host of harms are associated for those involved in

this supply model. Perhaps corresponding most closely with the notion of exploitation has been reports of 'debt bondage' (NCA, 2017). Young runners have reportedly been set up and robbed of the drugs and/or money they are holding, often by the elders they are working for. Charged with having to pay this debt off, they are then effectively forced into working for the line (NCA, 2016). Other harms beyond those perpetrated by the more senior members of County Lines groups have also been identified. Actively participating in local heroin and crack markets is likely to expose young people to their well-known harms, including being robbed by users or other dealers and more generally being exposed to violence and deleterious street drug market conditions (Windle and Briggs, 2015a). Looking at the issue more broadly, they are at significant risk of criminalisation, especially given the type of sentences associated with supply related offences of Class A drugs. The wider body of literature on runaway children would also suggest that extended absences away from home will put a strain on family and social relations, negatively impact on educational attainment and make any state support more difficult to implement (Evans et al., 2007). While remaining aware of the need to recognise the agency of the young people involved (see Densley and Stevens, 2015), this would suggest that just as markets and their structures evolve, so too can criminal justice perceptions and responses to the actors involved.

3.8 Harms at a local level: The involvement of local populations

While the involvement of young people has generated intense scrutiny and attention, it is important to note that it is not exclusively this population who perform the role of runner in County Lines operations. Illustrating the specific effect of County Lines on local areas and populations, it is also frequently undertaken by, or forced upon, local adult residents of the town where the 'import' market is based. Indeed, notably, in the research sites of Coomber and Moyle (2018) it was these who were the dominant population involved in this activity, contrasting with dominant perspectives of County Lines inherently consisting of youth involvement. Although not exclusively, by far the most common local population who engage in running are seen to be themselves users of heroin and crack (NCA, 2017). It would appear likely that they are often recruited through their initial exposure to these groups as

customers (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). Relating back to issues raised in the previous chapter regarding user-dealing, this would suggest an associated evolution and adaptation of this particular form of supply. Financial rewards and free drugs are suggested as being the main reasons why they engage in such 'labour' (Moyle, forthcoming). This population's involvement arguably therefore serves to blur the boundaries between more traditional user-dealer dominated provincial markets (May and Hough, 2004) and their contemporary evolutions as 'import' markets (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992).

As with young people, the involvement of this population has often been considered as a form of exploitation, with it being stressed that these are also 'vulnerable' and taken advantage of (Coliandris, 2015). Corresponding with the high rates of victimisation suggested as being experienced by this group (Nunes and Sani 2013; Windle and Silke 2019), what little is known on the subject would suggest that significant harms can be associated with undertaking running duties as part of County Lines operations. Moyle (forthcoming) reports threats or acts of violence as common forms of control. Also noted in her analysis was the dominant presence of bullying, with women in particular experiencing consistent verbal attacks from County Lines dealers relating to their appearance and overall self-worth. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the very nature of the work is considered 'gruelling', with little remuneration for their labour or often far less than was originally promised (Moyle, forthcoming.) Drug markets have of course long functioned on somewhat unequal power relations (McSweeney et al., 2008), but in the reporting of County Lines and the associated evolution of provincial markets, this would appear to be particularly pronounced and be having a significant impact on local populations.

3.8.1 The advancement of cuckooing

In addition to experiences of undertaking 'labour' for these groups, a second prominent area of exploitation of local populations associated with County Lines has been the prominence of a crime model referred to as 'cuckooing' (Buttera, 2013; Coomber, 2015; Spicer et al., 2019). This involves locals having their homes taken over by 'out of town' dealers and used as bases. Such incidences, now widely reported across news outlets (e.g. BBC News, 2019b), appear to specifically stem

from the itinerant nature of the County Lines supply methodology and the associated establishment of an 'import' market (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992). Moving into a foreign locale with the intention of generating a sustained dealing presence, these 'out of town' dealers will inevitably require prolonged access to local accommodation. At the most fundamental level, they will need somewhere to base themselves and rest but, given their illicit activity, somewhere to store and package drugs and shield themselves from the gaze of the police is also of prime importance (NCA, 2016). It is seemingly because of this that the frequent cases of cuckooing appear to have emerged and proliferated, with County Lines dealers achieving this end by utilising flats and houses in the satellite location.

The explicit terminology of 'cuckooing' – after the parasitic nest stealing practices of wild cuckoo birds - indicates that this is a process considered rooted in exploitation (Moyle, forthcoming). As with those local populations who become engaged in running and general forms of labour, it has been suggested that the aim of establishing satellite bases has frequently been accomplished by specifically targeting the homes of those described as 'vulnerable' (Coliandris, 2015). Illustrating the overlap, those reported as having had their homes taken over by such dealers are typically those with drug dependencies (NCA, 2016). However, those with what might be thought of as 'classic' vulnerabilities or conforming more closely to 'ideal victim' status (Christie, 1983) including those with disabilities, mental health issues and being elderly have also been affected (Butera, 2013; Spicer et al., 2019). Indeed, for those with learning difficulties, Chakrabotri and Garland (2015) argue that it should be considered a form of disablist hate crime. That recognised, ultimately, it would appear that the vast majority of those affected already have some involvement in the local drug market.

Highlighting the way victims of cuckooing may be specifically targeted, the NCA (2017, p.12) state how County Lines groups will pursue "vulnerable individuals who attend recovery groups, dependency units, and areas associated with those experiencing problems". Access to properties is typically understood as being enabled through force or coercion (Whittaker et al., 2019). For the latter, offers of free drugs and financial rewards are suggested as being the common way that access

is leveraged, highlighting the propensity of users of heroin and crack to be specifically affected (Coomber, 2015). Conditions in the home once the 'nest' is established are frequently described as evolving into something further predatory, violent and generally noxious (Spicer et al., 2019). Having been cuckooed, many have been described as being effectively imprisoned in their own homes (NCA, 2017). Violence, threats and sexual exploitation have also been reported as common, with this used as a way for dealers to demonstrate dominance over their supposed hosts and ensure compliance (Moyle, forthcoming). While for some 'hosts' there may be a perception that entering into this situation might engender some mutual benefits, this is argued to be often swiftly dispelled (NCA, 2016).

3.8.2 Evolution and variance

As with the wider phenomenon of County Lines it is worth considering just how novel this practice of cuckooing is. The natural comparison is with so-called 'crack houses' (Parkin and Coomber, 2009). Highlighting their similarities, these set-ups were adopted by dealers to minimise visibility and vulnerability from the police (Buerger, 1992). However, while there has been some recognition of more exploitative 'take over' practices emanating from these environments (see Briggs, 2010), there are important differences. Crack houses are venues visited by those wishing to purchase and consume heroin, crack or other substances. Supply will inevitably take place, but users will also often congregate in these venues specifically as a place to consume drugs. Reasons for using these venues include a desire not to use in a public space, if a heightened sense of urgency and immediacy is present, if those wanting to use cannot or are unwilling to do so in their own home, and any perceived benefits of using within the social conditions associated with crack houses (Bourgois, 2003; McCorkel, 2011; Sterk-Elifson and Elifson, 1993). In contrast, venues suitable to be described as being 'cuckooed' in the context of County Lines serve as bases for 'out of town' dealers and to minimise law enforcement attention in a foreign locale. They are not places where the use drugs is promoted, nor are they are likely to be sold directly from (Spicer et al., 2019). Beyond the more exploitative way that these venues are established and maintained, the difference between crack houses and

cuckooed venues can therefore be considered to revolve around their purpose and functions.

That noted, illustrating the complexities and often messy realities of the crack and heroin retail market milieu, cuckooing is far from a homogenised practice. Coomber and Moyle (2018) suggest that cuckooing best be understood as a 'varied model'. Drawing on data collected while undertaking this PhD research combined with Moyle and Coomber's own fieldwork, in Spicer et al. (2019) we have attempted to provide greater insight into the experiences and variation of this crime model. Taking inspiration from the body of work that stressed the important differences in crack house environments (Geter 1994; Inciardi 1995; Parkin and Coomber 2009; Mieczowski 1990), we propose a typology that highlights the differences in this practice and how it can occur. Doing so illustrates the diverse ways in which locals can become cuckooed and its often complex, ambiguous nature. While exploitation is omnipresent, there is important but often subtle differences to how this may be enacted and experienced.

Aligning most closely with dominant narratives of vulnerability and exploitation surrounding cuckooing are types that fall under the category of 'parasitic nest invading' (Spicer et al., 2019). Access to homes for such cases are achieved by force or under false pretence, with affected locals having little to no insight as to who the dealers are and their intentions. Violence, threats and attempts at social isolation are then used to try and ensure compliance and prevent those affected from reporting the situation. Often extreme, 'expressive' sometimes even sadistic violence (Copes et al., 2015) and other degrading acts can also be enacted towards the cuckoo victim (see also Robinson et al., 2018). A second typology identified is what we term 'quasi-cuckooing' (Spicer et al., 2019). For cases that fall under this category, while some minimal levels of deception or false pretence may be present to obtain access, local 'hosts' are viewed as having made a relatively informed decision to allow dealers to enter their home. Although they may not be fully aware of their intentions and the realities of life once their home becomes occupied, importantly they are seen as having made a choice, albeit one that is constrained within structural positions and their drug use (see also Moyle, forthcoming). Once access is obtained, conditions of

violence, threats and bullying are, however, again common. This is seen as particularly prevalent when the host indicates that they are unhappy with the arrangement or seek to remove the dealers from their home (Spicer et al., 2019). Following this, some may be charged with repaying debts for drugs that have been given to them for free. In turn, this provides further insight as to why some locals become embroiled in County Lines operations and engaged in 'running'.

A final typology of cuckooing identified in the context of County Lines are what we term 'coupling' (Spicer et al., 2019). For this, it is the sexual and/or romantic relationship between County Lines dealers and local hosts that is central to how access to homes in satellite locations are leveraged and maintained. Both of our sets of data frequently uncovered cases where male 'out of town' dealers had engaged in sexual relations with local females. Some of these were highly exploitative, with some, for example, going back to have sex in their homes and using the access they had obtained to take it over for the purposes of establishing a dealing base. Familiar experiences of intimidation, violence and a general sense of 'pollution' by having their homes taken over (Maguire, 1984) were then common, as was continued sexual exploitation within the 'nest' used as a further method of control and dominance (Spicer et al., 2019). This type of cuckooing not only highlights some important variance, with it being qualitatively different to other types, but corresponding to broader insights of drug supply (Adler, 1993; Fleetwood, 2015) it highlights the gendered nature and harms of County Lines drug dealing at a local level.

Seemingly driven by the itinerant nature of the County Lines, the practice of cuckooing and other harms associated with this outreach supply methodology therefore appear to have developed alongside it as a notable and novel form of criminality. This is therefore illustrative of the 'evolving' nature of provincial markets and the wider ramifications. Building on Reuter and MacCoun's (1992) distance travelled typology outlined in the previous chapter, these arguably pose as particular characteristics arising from 'import' markets. It also highlights the need to understand the impact and associated responses to County Lines at a local level. As an under researched area, knowledge of the practices and experiences is inevitably somewhat limited. Because of who is typically affected there may also be potential

implications for the heroin and crack 'moral economy' in these more provincial areas (Wakeman, 2016). Particularly notable, however are the various ways that local users of heroin and crack can become not just affected but also more generally embroiled in County Lines activity. The discourses of vulnerability and exploitation surrounding this demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of their involvement (Coliandris, 2015). However, this population's traditionally adversarial relationship with the police poses inevitable challenges to successfully responding to the problem.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a thorough and critical narrative overview of the County Lines phenomenon. Perhaps best understood as a response to the saturation of drug markets in major cities, County Lines poses as one of the most high-profile and significant UK drug market developments in recent years. While likely not quite as novel as might be implied by official publications (Daly, 2018; Hobbs and Hales, 2010), its intensified prevalence across the UK means that it presents as a distinct evolution in the way that retail crack and heroin markets operate in provincial areas. Posing as a distinct and popular supply methodology, it potentially leaves much of the previous understandings of how markets operate in provincial towns now somewhat redundant (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). Speaking to its influence on the broader drug market structure, this may alter the way that the broad levels of the drug market discussed in the previous chapter have typically been delineated. Especially in relation to the 'middle market' (Pearson and Hobbs, 2001) the operations of County Lines groups now make distinguishing between more national or regional wholesale and local street dealing far more problematic (Coomber and Moyle 2018). Connected to other established drug market concepts, the emergence of this form of supply represents the mass generation of 'import' markets (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992), providing a valuable opportunity to explore their nature and functioning. The types of crime and harm associated with this model would also appear to indicate some of the particular issues that might be prominent among markets serviced by 'out of town' dealers. The elevated levels of serious violence are one clear example of this, as are the impact and experiences of local populations.

That noted, despite the acute media and political attention it has received, there is still a distinct lack of understanding of County Lines. The small body of literature discussed in this chapter provides some valuable and novel insights. Yet, critical attention on issues such as the use of violence is lacking. There is also a dominant focus on the experience of urban actors engaging in this outreach practice. Little is known about the local context and how police officers on the ground are understanding, interpreting and responding to the issue. This can be considered especially important given the way it has been established and constructed among senior criminal justice officials, and the intensification of the issue within both policy settings and wider public concern. Focusing specifically on the impact of County Lines on affected locales, and the inevitable challenges it represents, therefore presents as an area of considerable intrigue and importance.

4.0 The policing of drug markets: Strategies, harms and alternative approaches

4.1 Introduction

Having critically reviewed key drug market issues and the specific development of County Lines, this final literature-based chapter focuses on the policing of drug markets. An often highly contentious area, policing remains the principle way that these illicit markets and their actors are responded to. Its role as the visible face of the 'war on drugs' stresses the importance of understanding and analysing how this activity is undertaken. If illegal drug markets and the way they operate can be considered as inextricably allied with the policy of prohibition, it is arguably only right that attention is trained on how those on the opposing side "man the barricades which society sets up between itself and the deviant" (Young, 1971 p.28) and seek to enforce the law against them. Despite most research under the banner of drug control addressing prevention and treatment (Caulkins, 2017), as a percentage of expenditure on drug policy, law enforcement vastly subsumes the overall amount of resources used across the world (Reuter, 2006; Ritter et al., 2016). It could therefore be considered as having been given a disproportionately low level of scholarly attention (Stevens and Ritter, 2017).

Again adopting a narrative approach, the purpose of this chapter is to critically review how drug markets and their noxious aspects are responded to by the police. In particular, it focuses on some key conceptual issues and perspectives to be empirically explored in the specific context of County Lines. First it details how policing has been structured in response to drug markets and how it has been operationalised, seeking to situate this in relation to established policing models.

Building on this, the second section takes an explicitly critical perspective on this area of law enforcement. Drawing on a wealth of literature it details the harmful outcomes of much of this activity and its general ineffectiveness in achieving prohibitionist aims. An important critical discussion is also presented regarding drug policing being 'symbolic', unpacking the conceptual reference points that have been used to develop this perspective. In response to these critiques, the final section of the chapter explores the options for more productive forms of drug policing and alternative approaches. After briefly discussing the merits of overarching policy reform in the form of legalisation and its relation to the concept of 'systemic violence', the notion of applying harm reduction principles to the policing of drug markets is discussed and a case made to explore its potential. Interrogating what extant literature is available on the area, it concludes by delineating the theoretical mechanisms underlying such a policing approach and how it is situated to respond to violence and other drug market harms.

4.2 The organisation of drug policing

4.2.1 Pyramids and mirrors

The relationship between the police and how they respond to drug markets is so culturally ingrained (see Linnemann, 2016) that it would be easy to overlook how this area has been historically structured and how it has evolved (Lister et al., 2008). While drug policing is deep-rooted in certain policies and ideas, far from being a static area it has changed and adapted over time. Tracing its history in the UK, the release of what is commonly referred to as the 'Broome Report' (ACPO, 1985) proved highly influential in shaping operational strategies and how the police organised themselves more generally in response to drug markets (Dorn et al., 1992). As Bean (2014, p.163) states, "In so far as there is, or ever has been, a policy for policing drugs in Britain, that policy was derived from the Broome Report of 1985". Notably, the release of the report corresponds to the general advancement of drug markets and influx of more commercially orientated dealers discussed in chapter two (see Dorn et al., 1992; Parker et al., 1988; Pearson, 1987a). It was seemingly in the face of this specific drug

market development and the associated societal fears that a more formal drug policing strategy was deemed necessary as response (Leishman and Wood, 2000).

The report advocated a three-tiered hierarchical pyramid policing structure comprised of a 'divisional' level, a 'force level' and a 'regional/national' level (Dorn et al., 1992). This was presented as a way of effectively 'mirroring' the British drug distribution system's apparent hierarchical pyramid structure and therefore being appropriately organised to respond to and disrupt it (Dorn et al., 1991). Each of the three ascribed drug policing levels were aimed at a corresponding level of the drug distribution system (Chatterton, 1995). Regional crime squads were tasked with addressing major distribution at the national and international level, force drug squads focused on 'middle market' wholesalers and coordinating force intelligence (see Collison, 1995), and those at the divisional level encountered drugs in their day to day activities at the street level (ACPO, 1985). Due to the structure it promoted, core to the policing philosophy underpinning the Broome model, was that the 'best', or at least most senior officers, would be focused on taking out the most important 'big fish' operating higher up in the distribution system, while lower ranking officers would be chiefly interacting with the low level 'minnows' operating at the retail end (Bean, 2014; Dorn et al. 1992).

Such was the report's prominence that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary used the model it espoused as an assessment benchmark when evaluating a constabulary's drug strategy (Leishman and Wood, 2000). Yet, despite its intuitive appeal, following the widespread adoption of its recommendations the recognition that Britain's drug distribution system was not as strictly hierarchical in structure as assumed undermined the model and its legitimacy (Ruggiero and South, 1995). Attempts to tackle the market based on the manner they misguidedly believed it operated put officers at a significant disadvantage of disrupting and dismantling those higher up and having the desired 'trickle-down effect' on those operating below (Dorn et al., 1991). Success did not therefore follow in the manner it was believed it would (Murji, 1998b). In addition to being flawed in relation to achieving enforcement goals, it has also been argued that considerable harms were caused by wholeheartedly embracing this approach. In particular, and demonstrating the

interplay between markets and socio-economic conditions discussed in the previous two chapters (Pearson, 1987; Seddon, 2006), the lack of attention given to Britain's street level drug markets during their formative years is suggested as having allowed them to rapidly grow, develop and embed themselves within deprived communities (Bean, 2014). Perhaps recognising this, while aspects of this model undoubtedly still appear visible today, the focus of police activity has somewhat shifted (Bacon, 2013). There is now arguably greater recognition of the market's fragmentation and more attention placed on street level dealing and markets (Lister et al., 2008). In turn, this illustrates capacity for future reform and change (Bacon, 2016a).

4.2.2 Operationalising the 'drug war'

Regardless of how the police organise themselves in response to the wider drug distribution system, of principle analytic concern both in Britain and internationally is how responses to markets are enacted on the streets (Maher and Dixon, 1999). Indeed, of all the areas of work that police officers encounter or perhaps even specialise in, drugs is arguably of particular intrigue (Manning, 2004). Originally understood as a somewhat dull, unnecessary hassle under the 1920s 'British system' (Berridge, 1999), this perception markedly changed in the latter half of the twentieth century. As Skolnick (1975, p.120) noted during the infancy of the drug war, "Those qualities which policemen have come to admire as constituting 'real' police work are to be found in the work of the narcotics officer". Much work in this area therefore came to play a representational, symbolic function, defining how the police were viewed and how they viewed themselves (Collison, 1995).

Attempts at responding to drug markets have often been the site of significant developments in police tactics, subsequently permeating out to other areas of police work or even becoming emblematic of policing more broadly (Lee and South, 2008). The use of informants, undercover work and the establishment of specialist squads, for example, all correspond to well established, culturally engrained elements of policing this subterranean world, but are also associated with many other areas (Loftus, 2019; Maguire and Norris, 1992). Built upon mobilising against a much feared and maligned 'other' - whether that be the substances themselves or the dealers that 'push' them (Coomber, 2006) - drug policing also provides an opportunity for what

former undercover officer Neil Woods (2017) terms 'fighting the good fight'. This is compounded given that it is often driven by public and media concern (Murji, 1998a). Serving as the 'thin blue line' against what is often portrayed as a morally reprehensible 'scourge' of communities (Taylor, 2008), it also fits into aspects of police culture, such as a sense of mission and action orientation, and their perceived societal role (Bacon, 2016a; Collison, 1995).

4.2.3 Zero Tolerance

It is within this context that a range of operations and tactics have been employed. In geographically specific, usually inner-city areas identified as having endemic 'open' market activity, so called 'street sweeps' have historically been undertaken (Dorn and South, 1990). These involve intensive efforts to eradicate drug markets, utilising an overwhelming, ideally constant police presence (Kraska, 2007). Associated with mass arrests, such operations closely resemble the zero tolerance approach made famous in New York during the 1980s (Punch, 2007). Taken at its most literal, zero tolerance can be understood as the police mechanistically enforcing the law, resisting any form of discretion and taking the toughest action against all those who are in violation of it (Dixon, 1997). More theoretically, such approaches can be considered as underpinned by Wilson and Kelling's (1982) 'broken windows' thesis (Lupton et al., 2002). They therefore also function on a symbolic level, attempting to send out an unequivocal message to those involved and the wider community about who has power and ultimately control over the streets (Tonry, 2002).

Due to their punitiveness and emphasis on 'militarised' enforcement (Lea and Young, 1984), zero tolerance policing approaches arguably represent the archetypal prohibitionist approach to policing (Canty et al., 2005). Just as drug war rhetoric provides a popular political tool to tap into 'public punitiveness' (Sprott, 1999), so too can such forms of policing serve as a fashionable punitive slogan. Its ostensible simplicity, how it can complement a wider 'meta narrative', and its capacity to resonate with contemporary societal concerns have all been cited as reasons for its attractiveness (Newburn and Jones, 2007). Specifically applied to drugs, operating within this framework provides the police with a mandate to 'get tough' on offenders and the motivation for the mass arrest of all those who are in breach of drug laws

(Dixon, 2005). With a strict unequivocal adherence to enforcing the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 as written 'on the books' encouraged (Belackova et al., 2017), this can be performed by officers with a sense of 'mission' (Reiner, 2010), with little recourse or incentive to consider unintentional or negative outcomes of enforcement measures.

4.2.4 'Cracking down' on the problem

Another form of drug policing operationalisation that remains notably popular within the context of the UK, are 'crackdowns'. Although perhaps slightly more difficult to define, for these a focus is placed on attempting to eliminate, or at least severely disrupt, a specific part or aspect of a drug market (Sherman, 1990). Common examples include a focus on a specific drug, certain market practices or the broader presence of drugs and their supply within a specific 'hot spot' area (Rengert et al., 2005). Because of their often well publicised focus they are considered as being popular among the public who likely empathise with the police's aim of targeting specific drug related issues (Kleiman and Smith, 1990). Characteristically high-profile, visible and sometimes directly instigated by public concerns, this also likely makes them evidence of 'getting things done' (Alkadry et al., 2017). While the aforementioned zero tolerance approaches likely function as a means for police to demonstrate control over a specific area and population, targeted crackdowns may, at least in principle, therefore represent a more focused attempt to respond to and solve a specific issue deemed problematic (Lawton et al., 2005).

Allusions between this form of drug market policing can arguably be made with the model of Problem Orientated Policing (POP) (Goldstein 1979). Introduced as a way to increase the effectiveness of the police and provide greater clarity on what they could achieve, this approach sought to counter 'means over ends syndrome', where officers and the police as an organisation become preoccupied with the methods of operating and lose sight of their primary purpose for existing. Goldstein (1979, p.396) argued that police work is most accurately described as "dealing with problems", and as expecting them to fully solve or eradicate them is likely to be unrealistic, the police should instead more likely focus on reducing the frequency that they occur or minimise the associated harm(s). For those engaging with POP, the approach can be broken down into three main stages (Tilley, 2008). Firstly, considerable care and

attention should be taken in defining what the problem is. Secondly, research should be conducted into the true nature and scale of the problem. Finally, alternative responses to those currently being used should be explored (Bullock et al., 2006; Eck and Spelman, 1988).

Sherman (1990) similarly suggests crackdown operations can be broken down into three constitutive elements. By unpacking their mechanisms, this then delineates how they seek to achieve their specific aims of enforcement and deterrence. First is what is described as 'presence' (Sherman, 1990), which concerns increased numbers of officers per potential offender present. This could be achieved conspicuously by greater uniformed patrols in 'hot spot' areas in an attempt to communicate a threat (see Longstaff et al., 2015). Alternatively, it could be achieved by clandestine methods such as test purchasing. This particular tactic involves what can be thought of as 'classic' undercover work (Bacon, 2016a) with an officer posing as a drug user and attempting to purchase from a dealer in order to generate intelligence or incriminating evidence (Nathan, 2017). Second are 'sanctions' that "denote any coercive police imposition on offenders or potential offenders" (Sherman, 1990, p.8). A clear example is the use of stop and search, a much-discussed power, especially in relation to racial discrepancies (see Eastwood et al., 2013), but one traditionally considered as one of an officer's greatest assets (Robinson, 1983). Specifically in this context it would appear to offer both the opportunity of drug market enforcement but also a wider deterrence. Finally is the use of 'media threats' (Sherman, 1990), where the crackdown and its target is openly broadcasted via media channels. This highlights their often high-profile nature and the general emphasis placed on 'sending a message'. Taken all together these illustrate how a crackdown may function when the police seek to take action against an identified drugs problem, often in the form of a 'hot spot' approach (Rengert et al., 2005). Whether it be zero tolerance approaches, crackdowns or other activity, the police therefore have an arsenal of operational weapons ready to deploy to fight the drug war.

4.3 Harmful, ineffective and symbolic? Critiquing drug policing

4.3.1 The harms of crackdowns

Despite their popularity among both those that undertake them and the wider public, the harmful impact that the policing of drug markets can have has been well documented. Of note given the drugs involved with County Lines, such critiques have typically been identified in relation to heroin and crack markets. This is likely due to the extent to which these are disproportionately targeted and the social exclusion of many of the market actors who become affected (Werb et al., 2011). In a seminal study, Maher and Dixon (1999) observed how an increased law enforcement presence led to market actors engaging in riskier behaviour. Storing and distributing heroin caps orally, for example, was one adaptation to prevent detection. Relating back to the components of 'presence', 'sanctions' and 'threats' (Sherman, 1990), the oppressive, paranoia inducing conditions associated with crackdowns have also been found to lead to riskier consumption practices among injecting drug users. One of these is discouraging users from carrying injecting equipment, with an increased sharing of syringes (Cooper et al., 2005). Users have also been found to rush the injecting process, skipping important steps in the preparation of drugs (Broadhead, 2002), not cleaning injection sites and missing intended veins (Aitken, 2001). Moreover, by rushing and not testing strength and purity, they place themselves at higher risk of overdose (Maher and Dixon, 2001). Speaking to the wider implications, intensive policing has been associated with interrupting health service use and access to needle exchange programmes (Wood et al., 2003). This trend has sometimes been attributed to users seeking to avoid being identified by the police as such by engaging with service providers (Small et al., 2006). More often, however, this would appear to relate to the issue of displacement, with users being reluctant to enter the specific geographical areas where police crackdowns are taking place and where services are often based (Kerr et al., 2005). Being a population that is already often hard to maintain engagement with, displacement is seen to exacerbate this, compounding marginalisation (Curtis et al., 1995).

This issue of displacement, a common observation when examining the effect of intensive drugs policing (see Windle and Farrell, 2012), is associated with a range of harms. At the individual level, users may move away from targeted areas and start using drugs in less safe environments to avoid the heightened risk of detection (Small et al., 2006). At a more macro level, displacing this population to other locations risks dispersing them, and any associated problems, into different communities (Maher and Dixon, 2001). Displacing a local drug market not only undermines the 'success story' (Shearing and Ericson, 1991) often constructed following a crackdown operation, but can lead to drug dealing and its associated by-products such as violence and anti-social behaviour being present in areas not used to such conditions (Aitken, 2001). Perhaps most damning, however, is that the displacement or widespread arrest of dealers can lead to the creation of vacuums and market instability (Brownstein et al., 2000), resulting in increased violence (Rasmussen, 1993). Indeed, somewhat paradoxically, the available evidence would suggest that crackdowns are often associated with an increase in drug market violence. This was the conclusion of Werb et al.'s, (2011) systematic review, which found that an increase in police presence and their attempts to disrupt drug markets not only failed to reduce violence but frequently led to it increasing, often in its most serious forms.

Evidence also suggests that some of the more individual level tactics employed by the police during intensive responses to drug markets can also create or exacerbate harmful conditions. The use of test purchases is perhaps the most notable. Further demonstrating the 'socialised' nature of drug markets and how they adapt to conditions and external forces, knowledge circulating that this tactic has or is being used can have a detrimental impact on their actors. May and Hough (2001, p.148), for example, found that in response to this police tactic dealers started to become suspicious and demanded that buyers use in front of them or they would "batter them". Not only does this elevate the possibility of violence but it may also promote more harmful using practices. Faced with the heightened risk of facing criminal justice sanctions, rather than selling to their social group to finance their own use, user-dealers may instead turn to less risky but arguably more socially detrimental forms of acquisitive crime as such as theft (Maher and Dixon, 1999; Moyle and

Coomber, 2015). In addition to those being targeted, it is also worth considering the harms or "deep pile of hurt" (Marx, 1989 p.129) that this may cause to the undercover officers themselves. As well as being exposed to violence, as one detective in Bacon's (2016a, p.226) study stated, "the worst thing that can happen is when the drugs are plugged. Dealer takes it out of his arse and tells you to put in your mouth. Fucking disgusting! But you've gotta do it, a crackhead would do it". The account former undercover officer Neil Woods (2017) provides of his time undertaking such work further speaks to the highly dangerous nature of this work. Ultimately, therefore, just as intensive drug policing activities present as a way of operationalising the drug war, the outcomes of this would often appear to be a mass of varied harms.

4.3.2 The effectiveness of crackdowns

Putting their harmful by-products and outcomes to one side, it is also dubious how effective crackdowns are in relation to formal prohibitionist aims (Canty et al., 2005). Despite their high-profile nature and frequent use, little evaluative research on this area has been conducted. As noted by Mazerolle et al. (2007, p. 138), "the general quality of research in drug law enforcement is poor, the range of interventions that have been evaluated is limited, and more high-quality research is needed across a greater variety of interventions". One exception to this is Webster et al.'s (2001) evaluation of an operation targeted at crack houses in London. They concluded that despite the police's efforts there was little effect on drug availability and price in the area. The targeted venues were also either displaced to other locations or re-opened shortly after. This observation is indicative of a wider limitation. With intensive drug market policing by definition requiring significant resources it will be strictly time limited, especially during a time of austerity (UKPDC, 2011). At some point an inevitable 'back-off' (Sherman, 1990) will occur. As has often been observed, when this happens the propensity for markets to simply re-emerge once the presence is removed is very high, severely undermining any claims that they are successful in having any lasting impact.

Other evaluations have found little impact on reducing levels of supply and their attempts at disruption even creating negative unforeseen consequences. Operation

'Reduction' in Brighton, for example, was associated with a short-term spike in overdose deaths due to the dealers who replaced those that had been arrested supplying higher purity heroin (see Stevens, 2013). This highlights how, even when police are successful in arresting dealers, at whatever level of the market, but especially at the retail level, they are typically swiftly replaced. As discussed in previous chapters in relation to the concept of 'market saturation' (Windle and Briggs, 2015a) and the wider trend of social exclusion (Hall et al., 2008) there are nearly always a host of other actors willing and able to step into another dealer's shoes when they become vacant. As illustrated by the numerous cases of dealers running their business while imprisoned, it is also worth noting that just because a senior dealer has been arrested and taken out of the market, this does not mean they will become completely incapacitated (Kleiman and Smith, 1990).

Rather that conforming to the aforementioned problem orientated model, as crackdowns embody highly visible responses in conjunction with intensified media attention, they therefore risk being a classic example of unfocused, reactive enforcement (Murji, 1998a). This might be appealing to generate a short-term effect and to display a robust and swift response to a pressing issue, yet in practice a reactive 'fire-fighting' policing approach is unlikely to be sustainable or effective. Instead, it may lead to a 'demand spiral' (Squires, 1998) with police constantly chasing after the next 'fire' that needs to be put out, becoming stretched and inefficient. However, because of the demands of the drug war, the public and officers themselves expect a police response (Collison, 1995). There does, therefore, appear to be a genuine tension that, despite the apparent ineffectiveness and counterproductive outcomes of crackdown operations, in order to retain public confidence and recognise the very real harms and community concerns that can arise from the presence of drug markets, the police must be seen to be doing something to tackle or respond to them (Bacon, 2016b). This paradox is illustrated by another finding of Webster et al.'s (2001) aforementioned evaluation that, despite its failures in achieving most of its enforcement aims, the operation was widely endorsed by the community and was seen to facilitate greater public confidence in the police. That said, it is also worth noting other findings that have found crackdowns to amplify

public dissatisfaction. Foster (2000), for example, observed the police implementing a very visible crackdown with high levels of publicity in their response to drug dealing to try and stress to the local residents that they were doing something about the problem. When this ultimately failed it left local agencies feeling demoralised and those in the community with a feeling of inevitability that these problems would persist or worsen.

4.3.3 Symbolic policing

Developing these notions of police imagery, public perception and the communicative signals that reverberate around drug market crackdowns, Coomber et al. (2017) have proposed that much of this enforcement activity can be understood as 'symbolic policing'. Two main concepts are drawn upon to provide the theoretical underpinnings and explanatory power of this perspective. The first is Innes' (2014) influential concept of 'signal crimes'. Emanating out of concerns around addressing fear of crime, this perspective seeks to understand how certain crimes or signs of disorder may be "particularly de-stabilizing to an individual's and community's sense of security" (Innes and Fielding, 2002). As Innes (2014) has recognised, this concern is particularly relevant in relation to drugs. Visible signs of drug use, drug markets, or related crime are frequently cited as a significant cause of citizens feeling unsafe, and are more widely associated with community disorder and social decay (Fitzgerald and Threadgold, 2004). This is likely compounded given the prominence of 'pusher myths' (Coomber, 2006) and the broader link between drugs and crime (Bennett and Holloway, 2009). Importantly, however, as Coomber et al. (2017) note, just as 'signal crimes' can have this effect on public perception, the visible actions of law enforcement can also function in a similar manner as 'signals of control' (Innes, 2014). For example, highly visible, 'spectacular' (Dorn et al., 1992) drug raids on the homes of suspected dealers can be positively interpreted by a community as evidence of the police taking strong action against a problem and sending a message to those participating in the market that the police are on their tails. That noted, resonant with the aforementioned work of Foster (2000), if highly visible drug policing action is viewed as ineffective or having failed, this can alternatively be interpreted negatively and promote a sense that the problem will worsen. As one

half of the 'symbolic policing' perspective, drawing on this interactionist signal crimes concept therefore illustrates how the perception of drug problems and the police responses to them are fundamentally rooted in and shaped by the communications they present.

Operating at a more macro level, the second concept for this 'symbolic policing' perspective is the notion of 'symbolic policy' (Coomber et al., 2017). This derives from Edelman's (1988 cited in Coomber et al., 2017) analysis of the political arena and promotes training attention on how the 'spectacle' of a system is constructed. Rather than providing accurate representations and discussions of relevant issues, Edelman (1988) argues that the political field is consistently imbued with a binary mirage of emotive threats and assurances which are projected out to society. Despite often being highly affecting to the public, in reality these will not usually have much influence on what people experience in their day to day lives, although this construction may create new challenges or problems in itself. Summarising this position DeCanio (2005, p.339) states:

> *"political realities are largely inaccessible to the public, save by the mediation of symbols generated by elites. Such symbols often create the illusion of political solutions to complex problems—solutions devised by experts, implemented by effective leaders, and undemonstrably successful in their results"*

Applying this to the specific context of drug law enforcement, Coomber et al. (2017) argue that the field of policing can also be understood as frequently operating at the level of the 'spectacle'. Beyond their general societal role and the powers that they physically enact on the street, the police are suggested to "exhibit an 'invisible' symbolic power that has a deeper meaning" (Coomber et al., 2017 p.5). Relating back to elements of Edelman's (1988) conceptual framework they are argued to represent notions of power, authority, and law and order in opposition to perceived threats. As 'guardians' (Waddington and Braddock, 1991) they also become entrenched representations of assurance for citizens. From this, clear theoretical links can be made with Loader's (1997) discussion on the symbolism of the police. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) notion of 'symbolic power', he similarly argues that the cultural

position of the police interplays with citizen's sense of selves, representing a way of making sense of the world around them and a means of providing ontological security (see Young, 2007). All of this appears particularly pertinent to the world of drugs where, as discussed in previous chapters and perpetuated by drug war rhetoric, 'othering', scapegoating and myths pervade, (Coomber, 2006; Reinarman and Levine, 1989; Szasz, 1974). Combined with Innes' (2014) signal crime perspective, these macro insights therefore provide a useful theoretical framework for interrogating the 'symbolic' nature of drug policing.

Initial forays into applying these ideas within an empirical context have provided insight into how these dynamics effect the 'dramaturgy' (Goffman, 1959) of drug policing, as well as providing greater understanding into how and why law enforcement in this area is enacted (Bacon, 2016a). One particularly notable finding is the observation that while crackdowns are often framed and promoted by the police as being concerned with targeting the 'threat' of harmful commercial dealers and organised crime groups, they instead often appear to focus more generally on local drug activity and actors (Coomber et al., 2017). Great effort is regularly made on sending out strong messages via the media about such operations and their purpose. However, rather than cracking down on the originally presented 'threat' used to instigate and justify the intensified enforcement action, they primarily often serve to sweep up the 'low hanging fruit' of highly visible, low level, local user-dealers (Coomber et al., 2017). This observation of crackdowns tending to cast a wide but shallow net therefore further undermines the notion that they operate within a well organised 'problem-orientated' model with precise aims. Instead, they would appear to be rather unfocused or generic, with targets and objectives becoming vague.

One reason for this appears to be how test purchasing is used and the nature of the intelligence that comes from it. Unsurprisingly, research into this area is minimal. But as both Bacon (2016a) and Collison (1995) have noted, this tactic is often deployed in a wide exploratory manner, particularly when officers are not sure exactly who is operating in the market or when the market is relatively closed. From Coomber et al.'s (2017) interviews with heroin and crack users located in areas where such operations have taken place, backed up by Wood's (2017) memoirs, it appears that

when entering and attempting to infiltrate the local market, undercover officers often target and approach those on the streets who are highly visible. These will typically be user-dealers, inevitably only involved in low levels of supply, or potentially just users congregating in well-known areas who are willing to 'sort out' a fellow user, especially if they become a recognised face. Based on this intelligence, it is then frequently these who become the main focus of law enforcement with vast swathes swept up and charged with supply related offences despite it seemingly being inappropriate to treat them as drug dealers 'proper' (Coomber and Moyle, 2014). Indeed, while it is important to recognise that a few of the original 'threats' in the form of more commercial dealers may sometimes also have action taken against them, even when dramatic, high-profile raids are conducted on the homes of suspected dealers (see Bacon, 2016a), if based on similar intelligence these may still not focus on such dealers.

Interpreting drug policing through the lens of symbolism usefully highlights that despite appearances and what they communicate to communities, even dramatic 'performance like' raids (Dorn et al., 1992) may generally only deal with low level offenders. Police crackdowns more broadly may also often end up broadly focusing on generic drug activity, rather than particularly harmful elements. While they may serve as a form of reassurance, demarcating the moral boundaries of drug and acceptable lifestyles (Manning, 2004; Young, 1971), in practical terms this is likely to be illusory. The public might interpret highly visible demonstrations of policing power and the mass arrests of those that appear dirty and as 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966, p.33) as positive signs, but this will likely be misleading. Minimal impact on levels of supply, beyond minor disruption, are likely to occur (Collison, 1995). Longer term, meaningful reductions in crime and anxiety inducing, destabilising signals (Innes, 2004) are also unlikely to take place. It is also worth noting especially in relation to the context of County Lines that when undertaken outside of major conurbations there is also likely a further deleterious, unintended outcome. Coomber et al., (2017, p.12) argue that the consequences of who is typically arrested may serve to "repeal the protective effects of a dominant low-level indigenous dealing population", leaving it open to predatory, violent and highly commercially

orientated dealers to move in or monopolise. At their worst, not only may such forms of drug policing therefore create a misleading spectacle by targeting those at the very lowest ends of the social and drug market structure, but they may also inadvertently create conditions that exacerbate the threats they express an ambition to reduce. How this may specifically play out in respect to a high-profile, 'threatening' drug market issue at a local level such as County Lines is of particular intrigue.

4.4 Time for a different approach? The case for change

By focusing on their harmful by-products, concerns of appearance over substance and general failure to make any meaningful progress of eliminating or reducing drug supply, a rather pessimistic picture of the role of law enforcement in achieving drug prohibition aims has therefore been painted. Despite everything thrown against them, drug markets continue to be resilient, with illicit substances bought and sold in vast quantities. As illustrated by the development of County Lines, markets also continue to evolve, manifesting in different forms, geographical areas and also becoming associated with a range of serious harms. Faced with this 'abject failure' (Wodak, 2014), there is a sense that things can and perhaps must be done differently. Calls for complete policy dismantlement and the implementation of a legalised market have grown stronger and louder, with the goal of taking the business out of the hands of organised criminals and into a legally regulated, state managed system (Transform, 2009). Corresponding with the 'systemic' explanation discussed in chapter two (Goldstein 1985), it has been argued that eliminating the illegality of drug markets would eliminate the 'virtually anarchic' conditions viewed as fostering the violence and other harms associated with it (Jacques and Allen, 2015). More recently, this has also been specifically presented as the answer to County Lines (see Woods, 2018).

Posing as something of a panacea, the legalisation argument is frequently compelling. However, there are two key issues that render it flawed. Firstly, it has to be questioned whether this 'unbridled optimism' (Bean, 2014) is founded in the realities of what the true effect of legalisation would be. As discussed in chapter two, despite their illegal status, most markets are already relatively violence free. As has

been demonstrated in relation to comparisons with alcohol prohibition (see Burnham, 1968; Kleber and Inciardi 2005), an overreliance on explanations based on legal status risks overlooking the true reasons why violence occurs and how best to respond to it. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, is the matter of pragmatism. Despite a 'quiet revolution' taking place internationally (Eastwood et al., 2016), there remains little hope of imminent wholescale drug policy change in Britain. More informal progressive practices such as drug testing are observable (see Measham, 2019), but the type of fundamental reform required for full legalisation remains a long way off. The 'moral sidesteps' (Stevens, 2018) used by Conservative politicians in response to suggestions of evidence based policy reform, the recent statement by Theresa May on how she believed "it is right that we continue to fight the war against drugs" (see Tharoor, 2017), and the emphasis on abstinence and the goal of a drug free society in the government's most recent drug strategy (H M Government, 2017) would all suggest the continued entrenchment of prohibitionist ideology among those in power (Zampini and Stevens, 2018).

4.4.1 A third way? Applying harm reduction principles to the policing of drug markets

Even in the face of the growing chorus of calls for drug policy reform, it would therefore appear that drug markets will continue to be an area of police concern and responsibility (Caulkins and Kleiman, 2018). With this in mind, the question to be asked becomes how the policing of this area could be undertaken and what its aims should be (Bacon, 2016b; Maher and Dixon, 1999). This chapter has already shown that broad, unfocused 'prohibitionist' forms of drug policing which judge their success on measures such as the quantity of arrests and seizures have widely failed in the wider context of drug war aims (Canty et al., 2005). Beyond minor disruption there has been little success at supply reduction and numerous unintended consequences (Murji, 1998b). Drug markets not only continue to thrive, but associated with them are a range of harms that are detrimental to individuals and communities. In response to this, a growing trend within the academic literature has been to suggest the potential benefits of a shift in policing approach away from one that is rooted in traditional prohibitionist logic, to one that seeks to specifically

address and minimise the 'noxious' elements of drug markets that make them particularly harmful (Caulkins and Reuter, 2009)

In search of a suitable theoretical framework for such an approach, those writing in this area have looked to the area of harm reduction and its core principles (Stevens, 2013). In fact, although this is considered a relatively new and growing movement (Bacon, 2016a), there would appear significant precedent. Writing in the early 90s, Pearson (1992, p.15) tentatively acknowledged its potential, arguing that there "is a pressing need that the concept should be expanded to include drug enforcement, criminal justice and the penal system". Long recognised as a crucial pillar in the response to and management of drug use, harm reduction itself has been described in a variety of ways. It can be thought of as a principle, movement, policy or goal, with the terms often used interchangeably (Single, 1995). Yet, however conceptualised, fundamentally it is built upon a public health approach that prioritizes reducing the harms associated with drug use, rather than purely seeking to prevent or eliminate it (Ritter and Cameron, 2006). Refusing to either denounce or condone drug use, it therefore takes a pragmatic, 'value neutral' third path (Nadelmann, 2004) to address associated harms, with needle exchange programmes being a classic example. Intrinsic to this perspective and the practices informed by it, is the belief that attempts to eradicate use are unachievable, that abstinence-based approaches may not always be appropriate or necessary, and that it should be recognised that some drug using practices are less harmful than others. This perspective has been criticised as condoning dangerous or morally wrong behaviour by prohibitionists as well as those who advocate abstention. There has also been concerns that policies or practices of harm reduction may operate as a 'Trojan horse' for legalization (see Kilmer and MacCoun, 2017). Yet, as has been demonstrated since its original formulation (see Newcombe, 1987), not only can such work prove lifesaving for individuals and invaluable for communities and society more broadly, it is possible for harm reduction measures to successfully function within the prohibition framework. Indeed, it is a distinctive stance of harm reduction not to embrace prohibition or legalization, or the moral discourses that surround them, but

pragmatically base a position on attempting to minimize associated harms (Erickson, 1995).

As Stevens (2013) proposes, applied to the specific context of policing and drug markets, fundamental to a harm reduction approach is the recognition that the level of harm present is more important than the overall size of the market. This is not to dismiss that there may be some correlation in some circumstances between the two. However, this conscious shift of focus subverts the traditional goals of supply reduction, with its concern on reducing the amount of drugs being sold and used, and sets in place an overarching guiding framework for law enforcement to identify and seek to reduce the harms present within drug markets (Canty et al., 2005). In turn, it also extends the concept of harm reduction beyond its traditional goal of reducing the harm per unit of drug used, to reducing the harm per unit of drug sold (UKDPC, 2008). Applying these principles to the area of drug markets therefore serves as a platform for suggesting how the policing of drug markets might alternatively operate. Specifically for the purposes of this thesis, it poses as an intriguing perspective to explore within the specific market context of responses to County Lines.

4.4.2 Shaping drug markets by addressing 'externalities'

For Bacon (2016a), applying harm reduction principles in this context ultimately equates to the police attempting to informally regulate the drug market. When considering this, he argues it is valuable to draw upon the work of regulatory theory (see Seddon, 2010). In line with the broader definition proffered by those such as Braithwaite (2008), regulation for this purpose is defined as "attempts to steer the course of events according to explicit standards or purposes with the intention of producing specific outcomes" (Bacon, 2016a, p. 248). This contrasts with narrower, more state centred definitions which relate to strict governance and enforcement of laws, and sanctions undertaken against those that transgress. Through this framework Bacon (2016a) proposes that the police adopt the role of 'responsive regulator', seeking where possible in the first instance to persuade and positively influence those engaged in drug dealing offences, compared to simply resorting to punishment and prosecution. By applying this logic, it is suggested that, just like any

other market, illicit or otherwise, regulation can be a valuable tool to positively manipulate how it operates (see also Caulkins and Reuter, 2009; Kleiman, 2005). It is therefore hoped that this will help to beneficially shape the market to operate in less harmful ways or, as Curtis and Wendel (2007) term it, 'train the dog'.

The notion of 'shaping' drug markets is important and fundamental to such an approach. As indicated in the previous two chapters, drug markets and their actors are highly resilient but also capable of significant levels of adaptation in the way that they operate. This is typically framed as the 'push down, pop up' or, 'balloon' effect that law enforcement activity has on drug markets and their actors (Caulkins, 2002). Just as the police start applying pressure in an attempt at suppresion, there will be a reaction, adaptation and the market will manifest elsewhere. It is common for this trend to be interpreted rather pessimistically as illustrative of the inability to enforce prohibition. Windle and Farrell (2012) note the tendency for it to be prefaced as 'merely' displacement in much of the academic literature. However, they argue that this overlooks the potential benefits that might be associated. Indeed, through the lens of harm reduction it is precisely this capacity to adapt that has been identified as being law enforcement's greatest tool (Caulkins and Reuter, 2009). By recognising the inevitable response from drug markets, it is argued that the police, instead of attempting the impossible task of eradicating them, can purposely manage and shape markets to function in less harmful ways (Dorn and South, 1990; Stevens, 2013). As examples of specific areas that policing could target in such an approach, the UKDPC (2009, p.29) include:

> *"(a) targeting specific individuals or groups identified as being particularly 'noxious' or harmful;*
>
> *(b) targeting areas where drug problems are particularly damaging; and*
>
> *(c) targeting particularly harmful behaviours, such as use of violence or the use of young children or other vulnerable people as lookouts or couriers."*

It is here, therefore, that the harms of markets, such as those associated with County Lines, can potentially be targeted with the aim of reducing them.

Unpacking the theoretical mechanisms behind this, Caulkins (2002) has likened the application of harm reduction principles to policing to moving beyond a 'zero sum game'. He stresses how, for those involved in supply, their market existence is predicated on the intrinsic desire to meet consumer demand and that they do not have an "innate need to create externalities (harms suffered by others)" (Caulkins, 2002 p.8). Recognising the ultimate desire for those engaged in supply is to generate profit, any challenge to their ability to do so, as is the traditional aim of drug policing, will typically be resisted at all costs (Kleiman, 2005). But if dealers recognise that they are less likely to generate police attention and therefore continue to be able to deal by not creating externalities, then it is argued this supply practice will likely be adopted (Caulkins and Reuter, 2009). Put simply, the police may have minimal power on whether dealing takes place, but they may well have significant influence on how it is undertaken, and the behaviour associated with it. Focusing on the noxious elements or individuals associated with supply, rather than supply itself, therefore moves drug policing away from a 'zero sum game' to something where significant successes in the form of reducing harmful supply related activity can be achieved (Caulkins, 2002). As Kleiman, (2005, p.153) notes, doing so exerts "both Darwinian and economic pressure to push drug-market activities in less harmful directions." It is through this, therefore, that a harm reduction approach towards the policing of drug markets can be seen to rest on.

4.4.3 A realistic model of policing?

Having subjected the likelihood of drug policy reform to critique earlier in this chapter it is worth considering how realistic it would be to undertake such a policing approach in practice. Notably, it would appear that if the move towards applying harm reduction principles to drug market policing is now 'coming of age' (Stimson, 2007), it has been developing for considerable time. Elvins (2008, p.241) highlighted the statement by the Serious Organised Crime Agency (notably now subsumed as part of the National Crime Agency) that it is a "harm reduction agency with law enforcement powers". As Bacon (2016, p.43) argues, rather than such ideas being a sudden, radical move there would therefore appear genuine signs that drug law enforcement has been slowly "moving towards a 'post war era' for quite some time".

Acknowledging that they had not been able to significantly achieve supply restriction let alone market eradication, Dorn and Lee (1999) suggested that by the end of the twentieth century British police had begun slowly moving away from war on drugs style policies and instead began focusing on managing drug markets (see also Murji, 1998b). Attention became primarily based with 'keeping the lid on' (Parker, 2006), with a "community damage limitation approach" (Lee and South, 2008 p.509) becoming the dominant strategy.

Thus, while drug war logic and practice undoubtedly remain, there would appear to be evidence that the aims of drug policing and what can be considered as successful outcomes have been broadened beyond prohibitionist notions of market suppression to issues such as reducing levels of visible drug dealing and protecting communities from drug market related harms (Lupton et al., 2002). Speaking to this widening recognition of what should be considered drug policing 'success' an ACMD report published over twenty years ago stated:

> *"(if) a crackdown on dealing in a public place leads to dealers switching their business operations to a private house and drug availability and consumption remain undiminished, this may be regarded as a failure in enforcement terms. But the other outcome may be to restore a public amenity for the benefit of the wider community, in which case the police should be given the credit."*
> (ACMD, 1994, p. 27).

Alongside this appears to be a growing recognition within the police of the value of more traditional harm reduction measures. In part, the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners appears to have advanced this (Austen, 2016), with many taking on the role of 'drug policy actor' (Seddon, 2011) and promoting more progressive policies to respond to drug use. Rather than sporadically emanating from the occasional outspoken 'thinking copper' (e.g. Grieve, 1993), the relentlessly punitive logic and rhetoric of the drug war is also now often questioned by many stationed on the front line (Bacon, 2016a). Reflecting this, over recent years and across multiple forces Britain has seen many harm reduction inspired initiatives operating under the support or even design of the police. These include diversion schemes for those caught in possession of illegal drugs in Avon and Somerset, the

acknowledgment that users and low-level growers of Cannabis will not be prosecuted in Durham, and the work of 'The Loop' in providing drug testing facilities at various festivals and nightclubs (see Measham, 2019).

Internationally, there are also many recent examples of how policing practices can minimise harm within the existing prohibitionist framework. Houborg et al. (2014, p. 261) observed "a remarkable change in the police strategy (…) from zero tolerance to a non-enforcement strategy" in a neighbourhood host to the largest open drug market in Denmark. Similarly, in their ethnographic exploration of drug policing in South Africa, Marks and Howell (2016) found that police officers recognised that existing strategies based on prohibition were ineffective, time consuming and often counterproductive, providing evidence that the police are wanting to pursue alternative strategies. The establishment of Police Pacification Units (PPUs) in Brazil is also notable in this context. Having accepted that winning the drug war is not achievable, attention has been placed on reducing the levels of drug market violence in specific problematic areas, implicitly acknowledging that less harmful dealing will continue elsewhere (Pinto and Do Carmo, 2016). Police presence and activity has been specifically used to dissuade gangs from engaging in territorial battles and violence, with a simultaneous emphasis on community policing, addressing resident's fears and seeking to generate greater engagement from neighbourhoods (Cano and Ribeiro, 2016).

Conforming to notions of harm reduction within a market context, this PPU approach can be viewed as a general example of an increasingly popular law enforcement approach defined as 'focussed deterrence' (Braga et al. 2018). Illustrating how such strategies appear to broadly fit with the emphasis of harm reduction principles, Caulkins and Kleiman (2018, p.136) note, "there is great heterogeneity in drug-dealer behaviour. Some are highly destructive to public welfare; most just want to quietly make as much money as possible. Targeted enforcement can help replace the former variety with the latter". As a point of departure for these strategies it is argued that an unfocused, blanket prohibitionist approach can lead to the police not prioritizing action against the most violent and harmful behaviours or groups (Felbab-Brown, 2013). Instead, it is suggested as more productive to selectively focus on removing or

punishing a specific criminal group or type of behaviour that has been identified as particularly noxious (Kennedy, 2006). In addition to capacity denial in the form of arresting individuals engaged in harmful behaviour, focussed deterrence strategies are underpinned by the belief that the threat of punishment will serve as a deterrent to those considering committing harmful acts (Thatcher, 2016). An integral part of this is the need for clear communication from the police to those engaged in harmful behaviour that if they cease they will not be punished, but that if they do not they will face a swift and robust criminal justice response. Sometimes packaged as a form 'Drug Market Intervention' (Corsaro and Brunson, 2013), evaluations of their implementation have frequently found them to be successful in reducing drug market harms such as violence and open-air dealing (Braga et al., 2014; Braga and Weisburd, 2012; Saunders et al. 2016).

4.4.4 The way forward?

With a strong theoretical base, the application of harm reduction principles to the policing of drug markets arguably therefore presents as a genuine, albeit partial, way forward through the 'dialogue of the deaf' that has hitherto comprised the debate on law enforcement and drug policy (Leishman and Wood, 2000). While there is often a popular preoccupation with the police being principally associated with enforcing the law, if it is instead accepted that the chief role of the police is order maintenance and 'keeping the peace' (Reiner, 2010), then such an approach is not only legitimate but is likely to be productive. It can also be justified on ethical and pragmatic grounds (Stevens, 2013) and corresponds with legal and moral human rights requirements (Stevens, 2011c). Pragmatically, it promotes problem orientated policing rather than reactionary measures or those based on either ideological or symbolic commitments. Of course, in order to function it heavily relies on officer discretion (Beckett, 2016). But despite the police often being represented as a rule-bound bureaucracy (Allen, 2017) officers do not mechanically enforce the law (Maher and Dixon, 1999). As illustrated in the discussion on the concept of zero tolerance policing, this is not only highly unrealistic in practice but is also an undesirable form of social control. Drawing on this fundamental tool in an officer's 'toolkit' (Reiner, 2010) may instead be of significant benefit.

Doing so, therefore, seemingly paves the way for the type of pragmatic approach where officers ask, "What sort of markets do we least dislike, and how can we adjust the control mix so as to push markets in the least undesired direction?" (Dorn and South, 1990, p.186). While clearly not conforming to prohibitionist goals, broadening concerns from what is traditionally narrowly defined around restricting supply represents as an opportunity for officers to achieve genuine success in their response to drug markets. In short, policing can go beyond the unachievable task of attempting to be drug market eliminators to drug market regulators (Curtis and Wendel, 2007). It can potentially have the power to transform drug law enforcement from how it is often understood as a losing battle or constraint on individual freedoms, to something which can be "a potentially humane and positive force" (Pearson, 1992, p.19).

Yet, for all of its theoretical potential, it is however important to recognise that it remains an under developed area requiring further theoretical and empirical development. One particular area concerns the practicalities of implementation. Despite evidence of their success, implementing focussed deterrence approaches from conception to implementation has been found to be challenging (Saunders et al., 2016). The logic and rhetoric of prohibition continues to loom large and can be seen as problematic. More selective enforcement in Mexico, for example, has raised public concern of the police going 'soft' on dealers, potentially undermining their legitimacy. Further speaking to the role of symbolism, amid political pressure placed on officers to make public places clean from drug users and dealers who are seen to pose a threat to the peaceful lives of 'decent' people, low level users and user-dealers remain easy targets and a convenient way of increasing arrest rates (Marks and Howell, 2016). Indeed, this issue of police performance targets and officer disposition has been noted by others. Bear (2016), demonstrated how making drug arrests for personal use allowed police officers in London to construct a vocational narrative, helped them demonstrate tangible outcomes from their work and served as a way to ground themselves in a changing field. Finally, it has also been argued that the core philosophy of harm reduction is inappropriate to be applied to the context of drug markets as the 'value neutral' stance it provides to drug users is not applicable to

those involved in supply (Blaustein et al., 2017). How harm reduction principles may be formally applied to dealers, County Lines or otherwise, therefore remains to be seen. As a perspective it serves as an intriguing one to explore within this context.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has critically discussed the contentious, yet intriguing area of drug policing. By tracing how this has traditionally been undertaken and specifically highlighting its failures and harmful consequences, a critical account has been provided. While often highly visible, efforts at supply reduction have had minimal success and harmful externalities continue to blight communities and the lives of individuals. Faced with these observations there appears to be something of a dilemma for researchers in this area. In many ways drug policing remains an easy target for those ideologically committed to be critical of its existence from the outset. Speaking to this 'ideological antagonism', Caulkins (2017, p.157) argues that "more than a little DLE (Drug Law Enforcement) research is conducted by people who despise law enforcement and has the implicit if not explicit purpose of discrediting DLE by showing it performs badly". As demonstrated in the content of this chapter, a result of this is that a great deal written on the subject focuses on "the negative lessons to be learned: what enforcement should not do" (Caulkins and Kleiman 2018, p.136). It is undoubtedly important to continue to critically scrutinise the counterproductive nature of much of this activity, often rooted in concerns of communicating messages and constructing appearances (Coomber et al., 2017). However, it should also be recognised that despite presenting distinct challenges and recognising the existence of negative elements, there remains scope to make suggestions of what could or should be done.

One of the distinct values of the promotion of applying harm reduction principles to the policing of drug markets, therefore, is that it provides researchers with a lens to view the world of drug law enforcement, and explore how practices can best minimise harm within the existing prohibition framework (Bacon, 2016b). It recognises that markets and the attempts to control them are difficult to separate. Their existence is predicated on one another and their nature is based on how they

manifest and interact. However, compared to the common 'policy prescription' of previous studies that advocate broad drug policy change, by adopting this perspective researchers are able to provide more pragmatic alternative conclusions and recommendations (see Maher and Dixon, 1999). This is combined with the continued value of undertaking research on drug policing that takes place with and within the police themselves (Marks et al., 2017). The harm reduction and 'symbolic' policing perspectives require further empirical and theoretical development. As Manning (2004) suggests, the realities of drug policing can only truly be understood by focusing on how it is being operationalised at the ground level. The everyday practical challenges of such an approach, and the tensions between this and prohibition pose as areas ripe for investigation. Doing so within the high-profile context of County Lines and the associated evolution of local markets that officers are faced with would appear a fitting arena to do so.

5.0 Entering the field

I walked into the police station feeling apprehensive. This was my first proper meeting with one of my gatekeepers, a senior detective in the force. Also scheduled to join us was a community safety manager from the local council and the facilitator of the local partnership work in response to County Lines. The agenda was to discuss my research and set up the foundations for my fieldwork. Police stations can be intimidating at the best of times but sitting in the car park for 45 minutes having set off early due to the fear of being late probably didn't help. I was also aware that I wanted to make a good impression. How I presented at this meeting was going to be key for me to gain long term and in-depth access. I tried to put the unsettling stories told by other researchers of officers being less than welcoming to the back to the back of my mind and instead sought to reassure myself that the relatively warm emails I had received the previous week was a positive sign.

I was greeted in reception, where the detective shook my hand and immediately looked down at my chest: "Afternoon, Jack. Oh good, you've got your security pass. You'll notice we do that all the time round here, before you speak to anyone they'll look down at your pass to see what colour it is and who you are". I chuckled, he responded with a friendly wink and my anxiety partially subsided. "Shall I give you a tour of the place?". The station was newly built and imposing. As he explained, it had replaced many of the smaller local stations that had been sold off recently and was now home to various teams and departments. "It's a bit of a pain, especially for the uniformed officers because it means travelling times can be really long" he mentioned, pointing out that the reason all uniformed officers were based on the ground floor was to help them get out as quick as possible in an emergency. "Are there any benefits to the new station?" I enquired. "Well, it does mean that if something like a double murder happens then the whole station won't get wiped out. In the old smaller ones if something like that happened in their area then the whole place is taken over by it".

We walked down to the bottom floor, so I could be shown around the cells. On our way we passed numerous officers who nodded their heads and addressed the detective as "boss". The responses to me ranged from inquisitive looks to friendly smiles. I could sense a distinct hierarchical structure and wondered if being seen with a senior officer was helping to legitimise my presence within the station. "I'll warn you now, it's full of grumpy fuckers down here", the detective said in hushed tones. "That's something we do in the police, if you're a miserable fucker then you'll often get put down somewhere like this". We walked in, opening numerous heavy doors that slammed violently shut behind us along the way. I was given a full run through of the process of what a County Lines dealer experiences when they're arrested. We started outside in the loading bay where the police vans dropped a "prisoner" off and made our way inside through a maze of corridors to the cells. A shower was pointed out that it was believed had never been used. "Most people who end up in here don't care about being clean", claimed one of the custody officers. A signpost was also pointed out for a corridor labelled "affray". "If they go down there then they'll meet our Welcome Committee", the detective said with a smile, "although we don't call them that anymore due to um… politically correct reasons". I looked around the cell we were standing in and caught sight of myself in a corner mirror with safety conscious rounded edges. I still felt very much like an outsider but was pleased that I was already being given literal back stage access to the police station and to the relatively uncensored thoughts of a senior officer.

(Field notes)

5.1 Introduction

Perhaps not wanting to keep his readers waiting any longer before presenting the findings of his time observing an English drug police squad, Collison (1995, p. 83) concludes a brief methodological account by claiming that "enough has been said about ethnographic research". For current purposes, this is rendered problematic on two counts. First, how a study is undertaken, the context in which the researcher is situated and the hurdles and challenges along the way, are fundamental to how the research is carried out. It guides what data are collected, how it is interpreted and

the very nature of the completed study. Second, as tempting as it is to rush forward to my own data, as this is a PhD thesis it would be remiss to skip over what is a necessary and important section. Just like Hobbs (2013), I have no desire to feel the wrath of the 'methods police'.

This chapter provides a thorough methodological account of how the research reported on in the subsequent chapters was undertaken. It begins by giving an overview of the two main phases of the research project, including what they entailed and why they were undertaken. The research questions that guided the data collection and analysis are also provided. It then moves on to critically discuss the use of ethnography as a research methodology and its capacity to enliven the 'criminological imagination'. Important contextualisation is also provided on the ontological and epistemological assumptions that were made. The next section of the chapter focuses on situating the research and myself as the researcher in relation to notions of positionality. A discussion is presented on the notion of being an 'outsider' and it is also here that ethical considerations and protocols are outlined. The penultimate section provides detail on the 'art' of conducting fieldwork, outlining the ways in which data were gathered. Finally, situated in relation to the literature on grounded theory, the chapter concludes by detailing and discussing the constructivist revision analytical approach that was adopted.

5.2 Entering the field: Exploring County Lines

In light of the intriguing and increasingly prominent drug market development of County Lines, the aim of this research was to explore how it was being understood and responded to in areas where these supply networks were suggested as having emerged and intensified over recent years. A highly exploratory approach was adopted, with an overarching focus placed on understanding how the apparent 'evolution' of heroin and crack supply in these areas (Coomber and Moyle, 2018), the associated 'import' markets (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992) and those who participated within them were being responded to by the police. It is of course common for qualitative studies to describe themselves as 'exploratory' (see Foreman and Argenti, 2005). However, highlighting just how exploratory this project was, it is worth noting

that the subject of County Lines was still very much in its infancy at the outset of the project. Little was known about the issue, it was referred to by various terms and was a topic of scant academic attention. I also had no idea that, as the research project progressed, the topic would explode onto national prominence, become the subject of countless media outputs, and become a central concern for the police and other agencies. At the outset of the project it was therefore important to generate a greater understanding of what it was, in turn partially answering the call from Windle and Briggs (2015a) for better understandings of this drug supply practice to be formulated. Because of its increasing prominence and high-profile nature, it was also important to critically explore how it was being constructed and interpreted by those responding to it. In line with this, two initial guiding research questions were developed:

- What is County Lines?
- How is County Lines being interpreted and understood by police officers in affected areas?

In an attempt to answer these, an initial phase of fieldwork was undertaken, consisting of interviewing a range of police officers working in a force area experiencing significant County Lines activity. Overall ten interviews were conducted lasting between forty-five to ninety-five minutes, with the ranks of the officers ranging from Police Constable to Detective Inspector. Crucially, all those interviewed were specifically working on the issue of County Lines and had experience of related cases. While they engaged in other tasks as part of their day-to-day workload, responding to County Lines and its associated issues in their local area had become their primary concern. At the time of the interviews it had also recently been made one of their force's top priorities.

Illustrating how researching a 'newsy' topic (Wacquant, 2008) and the intensifying spotlight on County Lines during the fieldwork assisted data collection, access to these respondents was obtained after I was contacted by a member of their force's communications department who was planning a local awareness campaign. This allowed contact with a Detective Inspector who subsequently introduced me to three

other detective colleagues in the specific force team tasked with responding to County Lines. Drawing on the strategy of 'theoretical sampling' (Charmaz, 2014), following these interviews it was considered valuable to sample officers without a detective function to glean the perspectives of those undertaking different tasks and with different experiences of the phenomenon. I therefore contacted a Police Sergeant tasked with responding to County Lines in the same force, who subsequently introduced me to five other relevant uniformed colleagues. Although a small sample, importantly the respondents in this first phase comprised of officers who had been specifically tasked to work on the issue. One other uniformed officer with similar responsibilities and suitable to be sampled was unable to participate.

As a necessary step at the early stage of the research process, conducting these interviews allowed for a detailed exploration into County Lines and how the officers were interpreting and responding to it. Providing an opportunity to refine my interview and data analysis skills, this also represented something akin to a pilot study. Given the exploratory nature of this phase of the research, a highly inductive analytic approach was adopted (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The interview schedules were left broad and open ended in an attempt to allow participants to guide their responses in an open way (Creswell and Clark, 2004). Not only did this promote the exploratory nature of the study, but it also attempted to ensure that any preconceived ideas influenced by what little literature - academic or otherwise - was available at the time did not unduly influence the focus of discussions (Dunne, 2011). Consistent with grounded theory methodology, it was intended that the findings would provide valuable insight in relation to the research questions and prove empirically and theoretically 'sensitising' to areas worthy of further exploration in subsequent fieldwork (Charmaz, 2014). In addition to being published as an article entitled: *'That's their brand, their business': how police officers are interpreting County Lines,* (see Spicer, 2018), extended findings from this are presented in chapter six.

5.2.1 Going backstage

While the interview data collected during this initial phase of the research were sufficiently rich, with officers candidly discussing relevant cases and their

understandings, from a dramaturgical perspective I had not sufficiently penetrated their 'presentational front' (see Goffman, 1959). Doing so is considered vital when researching any organisation, but it is arguably especially so given the guarded nature of the police and the sensitive nature of the topic being discussed (Reiner and Newburn, 2007). The responses were inevitably imbued by 'scripting' and 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959). What was required was to get 'backstage'. From the initial findings and engagement with some of the extant literature reviewed in the previous chapters, a set of three further research questions were developed:

- How is County Lines and the associated 'import' markets being responded to by the police?
- How can police responses to this local drug market evolution be understood in relation to the 'symbolic policing' perspective?
- To what extent can local police responses to County Lines be understood to conform to the application of harm reduction principles?

In order to sufficiently answer these, I needed to hear how officers talked about and understood County Lines outside of a formal interview setting, as well as observe how commitments to notions such as safeguarding and enforcement operated in practice. I needed to observe how officers were pursuing these dealers, the impact on local populations and the realities of policing County Lines out on the streets. Ensuring a strong theoretical 'thread' ran through the project, I was keen to explore how ideas surrounding 'symbolic policing' (Coomber et al., 2017) and applying harm reduction principles (Bacon, 2016a) could be understood specifically in this context. Given the emphasis placed on partnership working, it also seemed important to explore other organisation's perceptions and experiences of working on the issue. Relying on interview data alone was only ever going to produce a partial and mediated account (Dean and Whyte, 1958). It was time to take heed of Robert Park's famous advice to "go get the seats of your pants dirty" (quoted in McKinney, 1966 p.71) and adopt the ethnographic method.

The second phase and core empirical component of this thesis is therefore based on an in-depth period of fieldwork conducted with a different force to the one where the initial interviews were undertaken. Access was achieved by drawing on the existing contacts of one of my academic supervisors. Two primary gatekeepers, a senior detective and an intelligence manager both specifically working on the issue, were approached and provided access to the field. Similar to the first phase, the fact that this was a 'hot' issue and one which the police were keen to gain some insight on likely helped provide the type of access obtained. Drawing on this social capital, after a meeting attended by various members of the force where I outlined what I wanted to do, my proposal was accepted. I was vetted, given an access card to the stations and provided with computer log in details and an email account. Without County Lines being so topical, this level of access may otherwise have been harder to achieve or justify. Following this, I spent 14 months between September 2017 and November 2018 'embedded' within the force, observing and sometimes participating in a range of policing activities among different teams and officers. In total, I spent ninety-one days in the field, based primarily across four towns, all of which were significantly affected by County Lines. Adopting the role of 'observer as participant' (Gold, 1958) I spent time accompanying uniformed and plain clothed officers in relevant work, and several weeks embedded in the intelligence unit. I attended various meetings, went out on patrols, observed 'days of action', witnessed warrants being executed, read intelligence reports, accompanied officers when conducting welfare checks and spent considerable down-time in the stations.

Consistent with the aim of answering the formulated research questions, the majority of the data collected during this period came in the form of field notes based on observations and informal conversations. Supplementing this were twelve interviews with police officers and staff, with some interviewed on multiple occasions and frequent analysis of relevant police intelligence. Notably, as part of this fieldwork I was also able to observe a recently formed partnership group consisting of organisations such as housing providers, community safety officers and drug service workers, who were working alongside the police in response to County Lines. In addition to observing their meetings I conducted formal interviews with all fifteen

representatives from across these partnership organisations. This not only provided further insight into local responses to County Lines, but also how police responses were viewed by other relevant professionals. Combined, it is the data collected during this period of fieldwork that are reported on in chapters seven and eight.

5.3 The case for ethnography

Ethnography has a long and fruitful history in criminology, providing arguably unrivalled depth of insight into the world of deviance and how it is responded to (Calvey, 2013). Many classic texts have achieved the combination of being empirically rich, theoretically sophisticated and compelling to read (e.g. Bourgois, 2003; Hobbs, 1988; Winlow, 2001). Despite what is currently valorised in the academic research landscape, it remains a popular method endorsed by a cohort of passionate proponents (Ferrell et al., 2015). It is worth noting that adequately defining what ethnography is can be challenging (Gobo, 2008). This is not helped by, despite claims of an ethnographic approach having been used, readers being left requiring slightly more detail about the precise nature of the fieldwork undertaken. That said, there are some general identifiable characteristics that are attributable to most, if not all, ethnographic work. These include:

> *"studying people and their actions in their everyday environments and contexts; gathering data from a range of sources, but principally through observation and informal conversations; collecting data in a relatively unstructured and emergent way; focusing on a small number of cases to permit in-depth exploration; and generating verbal descriptions, explanations and theories from analysis"* (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.3)

Fundamentally, therefore, the central tenant to ethnography is the study of the social world in its natural setting (Brewer, 2000). This clearly contrasts with the sanitised, abstracted environments in which quantitative methods operate, but it also makes it distinct from other qualitative methods such as formal interviews or focus groups (Becker and Geer, 1957). As a single method of data collection these almost inevitably take place within a somewhat artificial setting and can be critiqued for their inability to go beyond the surface level (Potter and Hepburn, 2005). While

interviewing provides a valuable opportunity for respondents to express their views, values and experiences, data are often based on recollections, or partial, censored accounts. This is problematic if, as was the case for the main phase of this study, the aim is to go beyond official presentations and rhetoric (Hobbs and Wright, 2006).

Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that ethnography has proved a historically popular approach for police researchers (e.g. Reiner, 1978; Westley, 1970). Those who have adopted it have attempted to penetrate the inner world of the organisation and shed light on issues such as occupational culture (e.g Holdaway, 1983). Indeed, many of the pre-eminent police researchers based their path breaking analyses on this methodology (e.g. Banton, 1964). Fielding (2006, p.278) argues that the ethnographic method has long been prominent within police research due to its ability to bring researchers "right up close to the action". Studies adopting this approach therefore stay true to the ethnographic tradition of seeking to go beyond how the police formally present themselves both at an individual and organisational level (McLaughlin, 2007). By gaining 'behind the scenes' access, researchers can examine the practices, beliefs and rules that lie in the everyday realities of those working within this organisation (Westmarland, 2016). In this thesis, what is presented is not intended to be necessarily comparable in nature to more general police ethnographies, with wider concerns on aspects such as culture (e.g. Loftus, 2009). This was not the intention of the project. However, the data and analysis firmly derive from the use of ethnographic method within the policing setting, with this considered the most appropriate way to achieve the overarching project aims and answer the specific research questions (e.g. Mac Giollabhui et al., 2016). In turn, it also shines light on a fundamental aspect of police research of what it is the police 'actually do' (Reiner, 2010).

5.3.1 Making room for the criminological imagination

While it is important to note how ethnographic approaches compare to other methods situated within the qualitative paradigm, it is also worthwhile explicitly contrasting it with quantitative methods. This is arguably especially the case given that the 'evidence based policing' movement appears increasingly wedded to 'gold standard' methods that espouse scientific techniques (Sherman, 2013). One of the

most robust arguments for the enduring importance of ethnographic inquiry was made by Jock Young (2011). In *"The Criminological Imagination"* he meticulously critiques a study conducted by Cohen et al. (2003) that, of specific note in the context of this thesis, focused on the effectiveness of police raids on reducing drug dealing around nuisance bars. Using their paper to illustrate the trend of 'abstract empiricism', the complex equation with its "confetti of Greek letters" and "delightful quasi-scientific usage of 'dosage' for the number of police raids" (Young, 2011 p.11) is argued to inhabit a different world to the social world of the drug markets, actors and policing responses that the study had as its focus. Amid the dense methodology, it is argued that as one picks their way through the article, what is uncovered is a thin narrative and 'trite' conclusion that increased police presence lowers drug-dealing. Somewhat ironically, the data from which this study is based upon are also far from unproblematic, yet in the pursuit of scientific validity, the drawbacks are hardly mentioned (Young, 2011). Whole swathes of relevant insights, history and theory, as detailed in the previous chapters of this thesis, such as the failure of drug prohibition as a deterrence, the counter productiveness of much drug market policing, and the socialised nature of drug markets is also ignored.

Some have rightly noted the dangers of too broadly denouncing quantitative studies (Garland, 2012). Care should rightly be taken to critique bad examples of this type of research rather than the paradigm itself (Currie, 2012). Quantitative studies undoubtedly have distinct value and important purposes that are out of reach for qualitative methods (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Indeed, a common criticism of qualitative research is that their findings are not generalizable. This is an inevitable limitation, as studies such as the one reported in this thesis cannot lay claim to being representative across wider populations or settings. However, in addition to thick description, qualitative research can seek to achieve transferability to different contexts (Seale, 1999). Rather than attempting, for example, to provide definitive answers to whether a certain approach has succeeded, being concerned with how and why approaches are undertaken allows qualitative inquiries to identify and interrogate important factors that affect practice. As Fielding (2006) reflects in relation to his own work on community policing, it was these analytic insights, made

possible by such a methodological approach, that were found to be particularly useful for policy makers and police trainers (see Fielding, 1995). Notably, specifically in the case of drug policing, it has been argued that:

> *"The challenge to academic researchers is to be in the mix with the police on the ground, making sense of their realities and helping them to translate these into outputs that are beneficial for them and for populations at risk, such as drug users. Furthermore, academics can play an important role in working collaboratively with the police to facilitate policy shifts in regard to drug use and possession so that it fits more closely with the sense making of the police."*
> (Marks and Howell, 2016, p.350)

While the primary aim of this project was to make an original contribution to academic knowledge, in addition to ethnographic approaches having the capacity to help foster the 'criminological imagination' (Barton et al., 2013; Carlen, 2017), it is therefore important to recognise that endeavours such as this may also have the capacity to be of wider practical use.

5.3.2 Philosophical underpinnings: Ontology and epistemology

Discussions regarding research paradigms and knowledge claims inevitably feed into considerations of ontology and epistemology. An awareness of these branches of philosophy and their implications is vital in understanding the nature of social research. Researchers do not need to be philosophers, but such concerns are of central importance in situating and assessing findings (Hollis, 1994). Ontology refers to our assumptions about the nature of the world and of reality (Crotty, 1998). Those working within the realist tradition understand there to be a singular objective reality to be discovered. On this basis, little concern is given to the ontological status of what they are studying due to them being understood as 'social facts' (Seale, 2018). The contrasting ontological position, and the one adopted in this research is constructionism (Berger and Luckman, 1966). For this tradition, reality is understood as being socially constructed, relative, ephemeral, and contextual. Recognition and emphasis are placed on subjectivities, and how the reality of the social world is constructed (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012). As indicated by the emphasis on

understanding drug markets as 'socialised environments' outlined in chapter two, in this research I was concerned with how the issue of County Lines and the associated responses were constructed and understood by the actors, groups and institutions involved. Adopting this ontological stance allowed for this.

The constructionist ontology is linked with the corresponding epistemological position. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with what constitutes knowledge. Debates in this area concern how things are known and the criteria that knowledge claims can be judged by (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Aligning with the aforementioned realist position, those in the positivist camp strive to control the research environment, achieve objectivity and report generalizable findings. The aim of the researcher is to be detached and utilise suitably scientific instruments to independently measure what is under study, as it is only by doing so, it is argued, that knowledge can be generated (Kuhn, 1970). The contrasting epistemological position, and the one adopted in this research, is interpretivism (Slevitch, 2011). For this paradigm, complexity and subjectivity are not just recognised as being inescapable from the research process, but are inherent to the type of knowledge generated (Golafshani, 2003). An emphasis is placed on generating a deep understanding of actors' constructions of reality and their understandings of the social world they inhabit (Flick, 2018). Correspondingly, the researcher becomes the research instrument themselves, co-constructing the data with those they are studying, while also interpreting these data (Charmaz, 2014). Rather than striving for a position where the researcher is separated from and does not affect the object of study, interpretivists seek to immerse themselves in their subject's world and develop *verstehen* (Ferrell, 1997).

Applied to the context of this thesis, the aim of the research was therefore not to attempt to uncover an underlying objective reality of the local context of County Lines and the responses to it. According to the ontological and epistemological assumptions of constructionism and interpretivism this was not achievable (see Leung, 2015). Instead, emphasis was placed on generating an in-depth appreciation of the meanings and experiences specific to the context that I and those I interacted with was in. That said, the findings may be understood as applicable to other contexts

(Seale, 1999). A notable example of this occurred during fieldwork when a police officer read a paper I published based on interviews with officers located in a different force (see Spicer, 2018). He believed the findings to be based on interviews conducted with officers in his force, even falsely recognising himself as having been quoted. While the aim of the research was to develop a deep, contextual understanding within this specific locale, this, among other experiences, would suggest applicability to other geographical contexts. Given the emphasis placed on situating and analysing responses to County Lines in relation to extant drug policing perspectives (Bacon, 2016a; Coomber et al., 2017), they may also be of relevance to different theoretical contexts.

5.4 Navigating the field: Positionality and reflexivity

Central to the interpretivist conception of the researcher being the research instrument and the type of inquiry that lies at the heart of this thesis is the notion of reflexivity. While subjectivity is welcomed and indeed promoted, it is only with a suitable amount of reflexive practice that qualitative analysis can achieve rigor and transparency (Berger, 2015). It is, as Wacquant (2011, p.438) notes:

> *"not a decorative device, a luxury or an option (like vitamins in an intellectual smoothie). Rather, it is an indispensable ingredient of rigorous investigation and lucid action"*

Core to this, and arguably of particular relevance given the nature of police fieldwork, is both research and researcher positionality (see Westmarland, 2016). British police research has been identified as having gone through at least four distinct stages, with the focus and nature of the studies varying considerably over time. Reiner (1989) suggests that it began life in a 'consensus stage'. Studies undertook during this time were highly supportive of the police, lacking in systematic criticism and served to represent them as a "national success story" (Reiner, 1989, p.9). In so doing, they arguably reinforced the apparent political consensus surrounding the police and policing (e.g. Banton 1964). Defined as the 'controversy stage', more critical research began to emerge in the 1970s. Focus was placed on reflecting wider civil concerns emerging within society about the police, with studies informed by symbolic

interactionism seeking to shed light on deviant or problematic practices (Reiner, 2010). Influenced by Marxist theory, the third 'conflict stage' (Reiner, 1989) appeared in the late 1970s with a research agenda developing an explicitly critical perspective on police accountability and them as an institution (e.g. Hall et al., 1978). Emerging from the late 1980s, the final stage is identified as the 'contradictory stage' (Reiner, 1989). While critical and theoretical work was still visible, a shift towards more realist perspectives became dominant, reflecting the espousal of such approaches at the time (e.g. Lea and Young, 1984). Rather than being oppositional, researchers began adopting the role of a 'critical friend' (Murji, 2011). Instead of seeking to highlight what was wrong with the police, they also started productively highlighting what was good about practice and policy.

An appreciation of the historical development of police research provides an important understanding of where the key themes and concepts have come from, and how this has been influenced by theoretical interests and methodological trends (Reiner, 2015). It is also in line with this that the research for this thesis can be situated. Reiner and Newburn (2007) suggest that the contradictory stage has now been resolved and that a police research agenda based on crime control now dominates. However, rather than simply conforming to this and adopting a narrow and restrictive lens (see Greene, 2013) the need for critical, theoretically informed approaches endures. Innes (2010, p.129) argues that "research can make new discoveries; can shift the paradigms and alter the lenses through which we view the world that we're engaging with". Indeed, academics should not lose sight of their unique detached position to challenge consensus and draw attention to issues that may be overlooked (Jackson, 2019). It was in this mode of 'critical friend' that I therefore sought to situate this research (Murji, 2011). I attempted a critical, theoretically informed analysis as arguably all ethnographic work should (see Herbert, 2017), but did also not shy away from going on a "quest for good" policing (Reiner 1989, p.14). Reflecting this, beyond providing access to my PhD thesis, I volunteered to write a formal report for the force I conducted fieldwork with, highlighting some key areas of policy and practice relevance.

5.4.1 Insider or outsider?

While useful to situate the current study within the wider police research context, it is also worth reflecting on my own positionality whilst undertaking the research. Originally deriving from anthropological concerns, the insider/outsider dichotomy has long been of interest for studies involving fieldwork (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). It is of particular interest with regard to ethnographic approaches involving organisations (see Bruskin, 2018), and can be considered especially pertinent to police research given the nature of the institution and characteristics of their occupational culture such as suspicion of outsiders and internal solidarity (Reiner, 2010). By way of conceptualising the various roles that can be adopted, Brown (1996) distinguishes between four types of police researchers based on their relationship with the organisation they are studying. These are: 'Inside insiders'; 'Outside insiders'; 'Inside outsiders' and 'Outside outsiders'. It is the latter category, where researchers are neither commissioned to conduct the study by the police nor personally employed by them, that is the typical role of academics and the one I found myself in. Gaining access is likely to pose the most problems for these researchers due to a potential lack of contacts or willingness from the police to cooperate due to fears of what the research findings might be or the general disruption caused by a researcher's presence (Reiner, 1989). Reiner and Newburn (2007) note ways to navigate these challenges include outlining how the research can make policy or practice contributions and having backing from an established researcher. Taking inspiration from this, both drawing on one of my supervisor's contacts and offering to write a formal report helped enable me 'outsider' access.

As indicated in the contents of the field notes at the start of this chapter, negotiations and agreement about access and generally making my way 'inside' was principally facilitated by a senior detective. As is often the case, this informal research 'sponsor' was key to successful fieldwork (Hammersely and Atkinson, 2007). I was able to draw on his professional contacts across the various towns I collected data in, and he was also able to vouch to others that I was worthy of their time and could be trusted. He also literally served as the sponsor for my vetting to be undertaken, pushing for it to be fast tracked and maximising my time in the field. However, as Fielding (2006,

p.281) notes, support from senior officers has "a symbolic as much as a practical function". Being granted formal access was but just one major hurdle. Even when provided to an 'outside outsider' (Brown, 1996) such as myself, persuading other officers to engage or co-operate with a researcher can be an equally if not more demanding task (Loftus, 2009). Ultimately, while I was able to get my 'foot in the door' by drawing on forms of social and cultural capital, I was acutely aware that "there is a difference between access and cooperation" (Fielding, 2006 p.281).

A challenge and source of considerable anxiety in the early stages of the fieldwork, therefore, was breaking down these barriers among those that I encountered. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest that informal access challenges are often most intense during the first few days of entering the field. While I did not receive the same levels of overt scepticism or hostility as Bacon's (2016a, p.91-92) initial experiences with 'DS Daniels', because of my status and minimal contacts within the police, I felt my presence was surrounded by uncertainty and perhaps rumour. Wary of my 'outsider' status being a constraining factor for the research, I made significant effort in the first few weeks of introducing myself, making myself useful, being clear about what I was doing and generally developing my 'researcher identity' (King and Liebling, 2006). I memorised a loose script to recount when asked the inevitable question of "who are you?" to ensure that this was clear and consistent. During the downtime of the working day I would try to engage with staff members and discuss things unrelated to the research in an attempt to break down some of these barriers. While being mindful of not being too outspoken, to portray myself as genuine, I did not shy away from voicing some of my own stances and beliefs on issues such as drugs or social policy, even if they contrasted slightly with those held by the people I was spending time with. As with general access, the topical nature of County Lines also appeared to help, with the reason for my presence and interest in this aspect of their work often seemingly viewed as being legitimate and worthwhile by officers.

After a few weeks, rather than being interpreted as a 'challenger' (Holdaway, 1983, p.71), the initially sometimes cold reception began to thaw. Partly, this appeared to relate to the passing of time, with officers becoming increasingly open and trusting the more familiar they became with my presence. But I also developed certain levels

of trust, co-operation and engagement with those I was coming into contact with by attempting to be friendly, unpretentious and interested in their work (see Rowe, 2007). Having personal access to stations and being able to sit at a computer shifted from being something I and perhaps some of the officers considered as slightly odd or uncomfortable, to something illustrative of my legitimacy and cultural capital. It also minimised my intrusion, as no one had to let me in or out of the station and a document an officer believed I would find useful could simply be forwarded to my email account. This particular aspect was important more generally. Conducting research within organisations always has costs for those involved and, especially given the current state of police funding, I was mindful to minimise that associated with mine. While cognisant of Fielding's (2006) warning that if police fieldwork passes overly smoothly, this is likely indicative of the researcher having the 'wool pulled over their eyes' or perhaps having been uncritical or unwilling to engage in more challenging areas, I therefore attempted to be as flexible as possible to fit around the schedules of the officers and avoid treading on toes. Sufficiently outlining who I was and the reasons for my presence, also appeared to lead me to rarely being considered as a 'nuisance' within these environments (Hodgson et al., 2006).

I soon became the butt and occasional purveyor of jokes, adopting various nicknames including 'lucky charm' and 'team mascot'. Many officers also found me to be of use while out on the streets. Whether it was holding some rocks of crack for an officer after he found his hands full following a successful stop and search, using my phone to provide directions to a suspected cuckooed address, or being strategically stationed to see if anyone jumped out of the back window of a flat the officers had just entered, being considered as a source of help rather than hindrance served to break down these barriers, the distance between myself and the officers, and was of benefit to the research (see Skinns et al., 2015). A particularly memorable breakthrough moment occurred when I was copied into an email sent to the senior detective who served as my gatekeeper asking if I could accompany an officer's team the following week because I was "generally useful to have around". Specifically for the senior detective, I was able to brief him on academic research, help out at various events he spoke at and be a sounding board for him to bounce ideas off. This

subsequently resulted in several insightful interviews. While always being aware of my 'outsider' and 'observer as participant' status, recognising my role's capacity for fluidity, paying close attention to how I presented myself and generally being prepared to get 'stuck in' (see Fielding, 2006), ultimately allowed for the generation of richer data.

5.4.2 Ethics and situational molehills

The research was granted formal ethical approval following an application to the HAS Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the University of the West of England (appendix B). Relevant ethical guidelines fundamentally require researchers to protect subjects from undue harm arising as a consequence of their participation in research (British Society of Criminology, 2015). This, the principal of informed consent, and ensuring research integrity was adhered to throughout the study. Consent forms and information sheets were provided to respondents prior to the commencement of interviews (appendix C). This provided information on the research, their role as a respondent and the use of the data provided. Confidentiality was provided and the participants, the force they were a part of and any information they provided during the interview that would identify them or others was anonymised. For the second phase of fieldwork, the specific ranks of the officers were also anonymised to prevent identification. Interviews were audio-recorded via the use of a Dictaphone, fully transcribed as soon as possible after the interview took place and uploaded onto a secure university computer to be analysed. The audio-recordings were then destroyed.

Illustrative of the development of the project, the original ethics application principally concerned the undertaking of interviews for the initial phase of the research. The same protocols were adopted for the interviews that took place in the second ethnographic stage of data collection, both for those within the police and those working for other agencies. This phase did, however, contain other methods of data collection and presented new challenges, or 'molehills' Rowe (2007), to be navigated. Two detailed ethics application amendments were submitted and approved (appendix D and E), outlining how I was to conduct myself and the methods I sought to employ such as observations and the analysis of police intelligence. With

regard to the analysis of intelligence, I created sanitised and anonymous field notes based on their content. These was then checked by the relevant intelligence officer before being taken out of the station. For the more general fieldwork, the force and the officers were again anonymised, and all those observed were made aware of my presence and intentions. At the start of every day of fieldwork I introduced myself to all of those I came into contact with and let them know that I would be making notes of what I observed. I also made it clear that they were under no obligation to allow me to spend time with them and there would be no negative repercussions if they decided they did not want me to do so. When out in the field, while engaging in general helpful activity that promoted rapport (see Sherif, 2001), I stopped short of engaging in any formal policing activity. While I was privy to several slightly inappropriate comments, I did not observe or hear anything that put me in an overly uncomfortable position or give me any recourse to consider 'ethnographic whistleblowing' (Westmarland, 2001).

In addition to interactions with police officers and staff members, during the fieldwork I inevitably also came across members of the public. These included suspects, prisoners and general citizens. Because of the nature of many of these interactions and who these people were, ethical challenges presented themselves and required consideration. A form of 'situational' ethics had to be adopted (see Bear, 2016; Norris, 1993). As soon as was appropriately possible I, or occasionally the officers I was with, would inform members of the public who I was and what I was doing. Sometimes due to the nature of the scenarios this was not achievable immediately. In cases where it was either not at possible or appropriate I decided not to record any details in my field notes. This 'informing' procedure was especially important when entering people's homes, something I did frequently when accompanying officers on welfare checks. Due to the nature of these visits, informing the occupant who I was at the very start of the interaction was nearly always easily achievable. Occupants were also assured that if they did not want me to enter their home then I would leave straight away. Fortunately, those we visited were almost always happy for me to stay and observe, sometimes asking me questions about my research. There were, however, times both in homes and out on the streets where I

removed or distanced myself from the 'action'. For example, on one occasion a man decided he no longer wanted the police in his flat. While the officers continued to talk to him and did not leave for several minutes, following the situational ethical guidelines, I left straight away. At other times I used my own judgement and removed myself from the situation if someone was becoming upset, nervous or if a sensitive discussion was taking place. Throughout the fieldwork I regularly consulted with my supervisory team about situations I had experienced or what I would do under certain scenarios. The nature of the fieldwork and my lack of experience meant that this was often a source of anxiety. Having these regular consultations and ensuring that I was well prepared for the situations I was likely to encounter provided valuable reassurance that my actions in the field were of sound ethical judgment.

5.5 The art of field work

5.5.1 Data Collection: Solicited and unsolicited

Oral accounts are one of the main forms of data that ethnographers draw upon during fieldwork. Broadly two forms can be identified: solicited and unsolicited. Unsolicited accounts typically involve the researcher observing naturalistic interactions in the field. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest that this can be particularly valuable in providing insightful information and shedding light on actors' perspectives. For this research such interactions provided valuable insight into the understandings and perceptions of officers in relation to County Lines, how they were responding to it and their interaction with local actors. Knowing in what environment and settings such data are likely to be the most prevalent can be invaluable (Fetterman, 2009). Police researchers have often identified environments such as the canteen as being ripe for tapping into the organisational culture and the beliefs held by officers (Waddington, 1999a). Throughout this research, in addition to the time spent in more formal environments such as stations, more informal settings such as fast food restaurants provided useful insights suitable to answering the research questions. Notably, at times I also found unsolicited accounts were addressed directly to me as a researcher. Particularly in the early stages of fieldwork officers sought to ensure that I had 'correctly' understood the situation I had just

observed or the conversation I was privy to. This proved useful in helping me develop greater understanding of situations, but also provided a valuable insight into the understandings of officers and their construction of reality (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007.

In comparison, oral accounts specifically solicited by the researcher differ in nature. Due to the influence of the researcher they are not typically as naturalistic as unsolicited accounts (Speer, 2002). There are, however, ways that such concerns can be mitigated. For example, during fieldwork I employed non-directive and open-ended questions to promote respondents to talk in detail about issues from their perspective, minimising my influence. Nevertheless, despite these strategies, as Charmaz (2014) argues, it is arguably still always appropriate to view this data as being co-constructed by myself and the respondents. During fieldwork, one of the most fruitful informal environments for generating solicited accounts proved to be in police cars. Whether it was due to not being compelled to look at each other face to face, or the fact that long periods of silence did not bring about the same awkwardness they would in other settings, it was in this mode of transport that some of the richest data were collected (see Urry, 2006).

Of course, as part of the fieldwork more formal interviews were also undertaken. Similar to the strategy employed during the first part of the research project, an emphasis was placed on quality rather than quantity. As tempting as it was to undertake as many as possible, I was far more concerned with the content of the interviews rather than how many I conducted. I therefore used them as a way to delve deeper into specific issues with those who had specific knowledge or experience, and to guide the nature and focus of subsequent forms of data collection. Throughout, I also engaged in 'member checking' (Albas and Albas, 1993; Alasuutari, 1996), a popular strategy in exploratory projects that helped test and refine my understandings and analysis. Adopting a reflexive approach, the insights from interviews therefore primarily served the purpose of interplaying with and informing the wider process of fieldwork.

5.5.2 Field notes

As was the case for the observational aspects of this research, the generation of detailed field notes is the staple of ethnographic studies and the quality of these are likely to be inextricably allied to the overall standard of the findings. Taken at face value, the practice of generating field notes based on what one sees and hears in the field presents as relatively straightforward. However, it is often complex, challenging and worthy of significant consideration (Emerson et al., 2011). Fielding (2006, p.284) notes "Like police officers who learn always to be on guard, fieldworkers need to cultivate a Zen-like awareness of the effect of their own presence and to document everything". Prior to and during the fieldwork I therefore gave considerable thought to the practical issues of "what to write down, how to write it down, and when to write it down" (Hammersely and Atkinson, 2007, p. 142).

Starting with the questions of 'when' and 'how', it is widely considered good practice to record field notes as soon as possible after periods of observation, with the quality of human recall significantly diminishing after a day (Lofland and Lofland, 1984). To maximise their accuracy and richness I scribbled down short written notes when in the field. I tried to make as many of these and in as much detail as possible, but I was also aware that taking copious notes was likely to leave officers feeling self-conscious, perhaps suspicious of what I was writing and generally having a negative effect on the naturalistic environment (see Rowe, 2007). Doing so may well have also come across as discourteous and there would have been the very real risk that being more concerned with writing notes than observing I would, paradoxically, have missed important details. Following Bacon (2016a), I only ever wrote notes that I would have been comfortable for officers to read, although regular trips to the relative privacy of the toilets served as a valuable recourse. Fortunately, the subsequent enquiries that Newburn and Reiner (2007) suggest may occur about the state of my health did not materialise. Despite often presenting as a rather arduous task, with the help of these notes to jog my memory, I adhered to writing these up in full on the evening of the day in which the fieldwork took place.

Moving to the issue of 'what' to write down, it is important to recognise that it is impossible for a researcher to capture the entirety of a social setting (Wolfinger,

2002). There will be an inevitable trade-off between breadth and depth as field notes are generated. As much as I wanted or, especially in the early stages, felt I needed to, the specific focus and content of the field notes was a selective process. I found that reminding myself of the research questions helped focus my attention on what was relevant. The influence of 'foreshadowed problems' (Hammersely and Atkinson, 2007) and 'sensitising concepts' (Charmaz 2014) in the form of extant theoretical perspectives from Bacon (2016a) and Coomber et al. (2017), further trained my attention to specific areas and informed my interpretation of them. Decisions on what to write down was also influenced by the phase of the research. In the early stages of the fieldwork and in line with the exploratory approach, what I collected was broad in scope. As the project progressed and I began to develop a more specific focus on particular issues, the content of what I wrote down became more selective and focused (Emerson et al., 2011). I was able to compare between cases, test my understandings and refine my analysis. By the end of the fieldwork period, I had amassed a considerable body of data that I was glad to have engaged with analytically during their collection, rather than being faced with at the end.

5.6 Analytical approach: A form of 'grounded theorising'

There is no set 'recipe' for qualitative analysis. How one goes about it is likely to be influenced by the aims of the study and the predilection of the researcher. However, rather than being a hindrance this freedom can be viewed as one of its key methodological advantages (Flick, 2018). The approach adopted in this study can best be described as a form of "grounded theorizing" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.158), a popular strategy for those engaged in ethnographic work and qualitative research more broadly (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory has been described as "the pre-eminent qualitative research method" (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007, p.1). While some highlight the discrepancy between those who claim to have used it and those who truly have (see Lee and Fielding, 1996), it has been reported as the most widely used method across the social sciences (Bryman, 2016). Underpinned by highly inductive, systematic, but also flexible guidelines for obtaining and analysing data, studies adopting it seek to construct a theoretical analysis that is empirically grounded, and therefore fits closely with the data. Originally formulated

by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the methodology serves as an antithesis to the objectivist tradition of testing existing theory and to qualitative research that seeks to transplant grand theory into their study regardless of how well it fits. For those engaging in grounded theorising it is ultimately the data that form the very foundation of the study and that guides and generates the analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

Despite grounded theory's widespread popularity and influence, the way it was originally formulated has been criticised, somewhat ironically given the basis from which it emerged, as being flawed due to its 'naive positivism' (Thornberg, 2012). The notion contended by classic grounded theorists that a researcher can be a theoretically neutral, objective collector and analyst of data is considered problematic, as how a phenomenon is viewed is formed based on factors such as prior experience, knowledge and world view (Kelle, 2007). Seeking to downplay or ignore the role of social context in the way that knowledge is generated therefore leaves classic grounded theory open to the charge of being positivistic (Clarke, 2005). In light of these concerns, a number of scholars have attempted to move grounded theory into new directions that acknowledge contemporary epistemological and methodological developments (Cresswell, 2013). In particular, Charmaz (2014) has sought to integrate the interpretivist elements of the methodology in her 'constructivist revision' approach. Rather than representing theory as having been 'discovered' from the data by the objective researcher (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), constructivist grounded theory recognises that researchers are part of the empirical world and have an active role in constructing the data and indeed all aspects of the research process. The analysis from such studies are therefore regarded as being constructed through the interactions, perspectives and overall practices employed by those conducting the research (Charmaz, 2014). Rather than being definitive and concrete, conclusions are viewed as being suggestive and incomplete (Cresswell, 2013).

In addition to the charges of naive positivism, the emphasis that grounded theorists have placed on pure induction has also been viewed as problematic. Classic grounded theory, as originally formulated and subsequently developed by Glaser (1978), ardently promotes a purely inductive analytical approach. It is argued that in order

for the researcher to remain as a tabula rasa and avoid forcing data into preconceived concepts, it is necessary to delay the literature review until the very end of the analysis. It is from this highly inductive strategy that classic grounded theorists argue that studies are provided with the power to generate truly novel insights and ensures that the generated theory ultimately fits and is grounded in the data (Glaser, 1992). However, the practicalities and utility of undertaking such an approach have been heavily criticised.

First, one cannot unlearn what they already know (Schreiber, 2001). While a pure grounded theorist may attempt to shelter themselves from the extant literature on their area of focus it would seem inevitable that a certain level of existing knowledge will have been attained (Thornberg, 2012). As was the case for this research, for example, in order to obtain funding, researchers are required to present a detailed proposal outlining how the study will make an original contribution to knowledge (Dunne, 2011). It is only by having an awareness of the existing literature that this can be achieved. As Clarke (2005), argues, at its worse advocating this purist position could lead to researchers feigning to be theoretically uncontaminated and misrepresenting the ways in which their analysis has been conducted. Instead, what should arguably be promoted is for researchers to be open and reflexive about their theoretical understandings and influences (Dey, 1999). In so doing, such an approach satisfies the necessity for reflexivity within qualitative research and the importance that many place on this (Ramalho et al., 2015). As has been made clear, for this research, in addition to the small body of literature available on the topic of County Lines, the research explicitly drew on the theoretical perspectives from Bacon (2016a) and Coomber et al. (2017). While the analysis is fundamentally grounded in the data, these were therefore used to inform, contextualise and guide the analysis.

Second, there are of course clear benefits of engaging with the literature before and during data collection and analysis. Having this awareness of the extant literature allowed me to guide the study and build on what has been done before. As Lempert (2007) argues, in order to appropriately participate in a theoretical conversation there is firstly a requirement to understand it. By not engaging with the literature, what at first might have appeared to be a novel and innovative analytical or empirical

insight may instead merely have been a reflection of my ignorance regarding the current state of knowledge and what has come before. Relatedly, appropriate engagement with existing literature and interaction with extant theories and concepts can also elevate the standard of research by, for example, helping to draw the researcher's attention to important specific details in their own data (Thornberg, 2012).

Rather than adhering strictly to classic grounded theory, the analytical strategy adopted in this project was therefore an 'informed' (Thornberg, 2012), constructivist revision of grounded theory approach (see Charmaz, 2014). Rather than fixating on the extent of exposure to extant theory at the early stages of the project, what was considered important was ensuring that this was used appropriately (Strübing, 2007). As Dey (1999, p.251) states, "There is a difference between an open mind and an empty head". Ultimately therefore, treating these as 'sensitising concepts' (Charmaz, 2014), the insights derived from the existing literature helped guide the project as well as serving as valuable sources of inspiration to enrich the analysis. They represented springboards from which to start from rather than places to end, earning their way in to the analysis rather than being fallen back on. Recognising the power to provide novel findings firmly grounded in the data, the analysis retained an emphasis on induction by drawing on strategies classically associated with grounded theory. This pragmatic middle ground between deductive and inductive analysis therefore conforms to what Layder (1998) terms adaptive theory. An initial theoretical scaffold was constructed that was adaptable to change through the iterative process of going back and forth or 'flip flopping' (Pidgeon and Henwood, 1997) between the data and the literature. In short, while the data collected during fieldwork drove the analysis, existing concepts and theoretical perspectives helped shape what was being focused on and how it was being interpreted.

5.6.1 Theoretical sampling and saturation

A common strategy employed by those engaging in grounded theorising is the process of theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This consists of seeking pertinent data to develop and refine the ongoing analysis. It also helps to focus in on specific areas that are pertinent to the researcher's interests. As Charmaz (2014,

p.14.) describes: "Like a camera with many lenses, first you view a broad sweep of the landscape. Subsequently, you change your lens several times to bring scenes closer and closer into view". Theoretical sampling is therefore a way to explicitly focus on developing conceptual analytic categories until a stage is reached where no new properties emerge and where new data no longer reveal fresh insight, commonly referred to as 'saturation' (Flick, 2018). It also neatly compliments the iterative, constant comparison process associated with grounded theory. This strategy was used throughout the research. The insights derived from the initial interviews, for example, led to the theoretical sampling of observing officers in a more naturalistic environment. Conducting interviews with fifteen professionals working for organisations outside of the police is a further example, with these specifically helping to develop and refine my analysis on areas such as symbolism.

However, despite being commonly referred to, what constitutes 'saturation' is often far from clear. The term originated from the early grounded theory literature (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), but has now entered common parlance across qualitative research more generally. This perhaps partly explains why there appears to be confusion around what the term truly means. Dey (1999) suggests that its use is problematic due its imprecision, something compounded due to it being discussed uncritically in the literature. Indeed, when saturation is reported this is often done by claims rather than proof (Morse, 1995) and there is no explicit criterion for knowing when this has been achieved (Fielding, 2001). The apparent risk of this is that claims of reaching saturation will be made prematurely, shutting down the process too early and resulting in a superficial analysis (Dey, 1999). However, it is also important to recognise that the decision of when 'enough is enough' will always likely require a leap in the dark on the part of the researcher and there is always the possibility that new insights may develop if further data collection continues. Drawing the line is, however, ultimately an important step as excessive data not only slow down the trajectory of the research but can also swamp the researcher, causing conceptual blindness and impeding analysis (Morse, 2007). Of course, as was the case for this research, in reality it is likely that the choice of when data collection concludes will be decided more by practical issues than any other. As a way of

alleviating some of this uncertainty and because of the impossibility of achieving saturation in any meaningful sense when researching an issue of such 'newsy' nature, I adopted Dey's (1999) conception of 'theoretical sufficiency'. As the issue of County Lines was consistently developing throughout the fieldwork, claiming that all avenues had been exhausted was simply unachievable. Instead, understanding the process in this way provided a more realistic depiction of the fieldwork and also provides a better description of the process of my analysis.

5.6.2 Coding and memoing

With regard to the practicalities of analysis, grounded theory provides distinct coding steps and procedures that researchers are encouraged to pursue. The process of coding is described as:

> *"The pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data. Through coding you define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means."* (Charmaz, 2014, p. 46)

Rather than rigidly sticking to these promoted procedures, they were treated as heuristic devices and flexible guidelines. For the interview transcripts and majority of the field notes, a process of 'open coding' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was undertaken using the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software package 'NVivo', where detailed coding ensured that the analysis constructed in subsequent stages of the research was grounded in the data. At this stage a specific emphasis was also placed on producing 'in vivo' codes, using the specific terminology expressed by respondents. These codes can serve as 'symbolic markers' for the groups under study and also anchor analysis into the data and the world of the participants (Charmaz, 2014). In this thesis, the emphasis placed on this is specifically illustrated in the language of 'business' used by officers when discussing the presence and functioning of County Lines in their area, relating to the open code of 'profit maximisation' reported in chapter six.

The second major coding procedure involved 'focused coding' (Charmaz, 2014). Codes generated in this stage were more selective and involved sifting through the large amounts of initial codes to synthesise their analytic direction and help explain

larger amounts of data across different sources. This strategy was also beneficial for analysing the field notes recorded towards the end of the fieldwork. The emphasis placed on building on the emergent analysis at this stage of the research, such as interrogating and developing the 'symbolic' nature of County Lines policing, meant that a more focused form of analysis was necessary. Ultimately, therefore, by becoming more conceptual, this process, and the focused codes that came from it, elevated the analysis to a more theoretical level (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The following figure provides an illustration of this coding procedure:
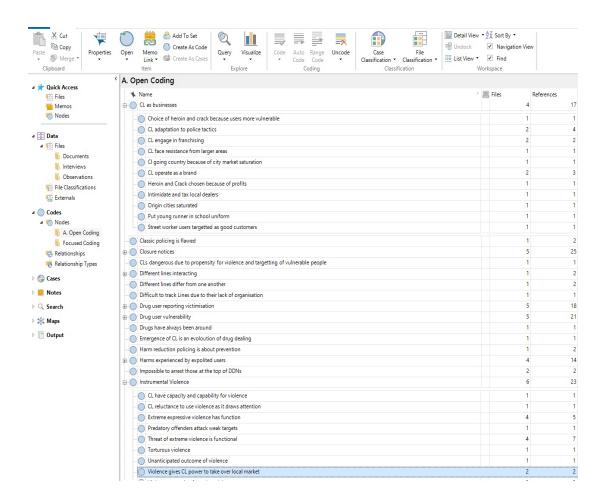

Figure 1: NVivo coding

A further analytic tool used throughout the research was the use of memos (Charmaz, 2014). Creating these served as a way to develop thinking around the data and crystallise ideas that developed from the analysis. They were also of particular

use with regard to analysing the mass of field notes. The writing of memos began at the start of the research and continued throughout. Doing so helped to develop codes from the descriptive to the more analytical. Memos were regularly redrafted, revised and combined with others. In part, the practice served as something of a pressure valve, providing a welcome release for all of the insights and thoughts that had built up when thinking analytically about my data. During my fieldwork I also kept a 'live' memo, detailing areas worthy of further exploration during subsequent observations or interviews. Doing so served as a useful additional analytic outlet, but also more practically provided a record of my thoughts as the research progressed and a personal reminder of areas I wished to focus on. Combined with the analytical categories developed through coding, it is the culmination of the contents of these memos that forms the basis of what is presented in the following three findings chapters.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a thorough methodological account of how and why the research was undertaken. It provides an overview of the setting and nature of the two studies undertaken and their relationship to one another. It also provides detail on the research questions that were formulated and developed during the period of data collection and that ultimately guided the study. As with any research method, it is important to detail why and how it was used. The critical discussion on ethnography provides a justification for adopting this method, alongside it being situated alongside appropriate ontological and epistemological assumptions. Correspondingly, as integral components of the type of inquiry undertaken for this research, extended consideration to notions of reflexivity and positionality provides important contextualisation and rigour, as well as greater detail into the nature and experiences of the fieldwork, including ethical procedures and deliberations. Similarly, discussions of the 'art' of undertaking successful fieldwork and the procedure of analysis illustrates not only how the research draws upon and is situated within established methodological traditions, but also provides transparency on how this was undertaken. Having provided this detail, the findings presented in subsequent chapters can be suitably understood and assessed.

By explicitly situating these methodological discussions and reflections in relation to a wider body of literature the chapter also makes some more general contributions to ongoing methodological considerations and debates. The benefits of observational methods in comparison to purely interviews stresses the continued need for criminologists to go out into the field, see things with their own eyes and hear things with their own ears (Ferrell et al., 2015). Similarly, despite trends in evidence based policing and the dominance of the crime control agenda, ethnographic endeavours continue to be important, not just within an academic context but also with the potential for valuable insights into policy and practice. Finally, as useful and influential as grounded theory may be, the practicalities of undertaking such an analysis stress the development of more realistic and pragmatic approaches. To refer back to the assertions made by Collison (1995) in the introduction of this chapter, in this thesis, perhaps enough has now been said about methods.

6.0 Police officer interpretations of evolving local heroin and crack supply: The County Lines 'business model' and initial responses

6.1 Introduction

This first empirical findings chapter presents an analysis derived from an initial set of exploratory interviews with police officers. It is worth reiterating that at the outset of this project relatively little was still known about the phenomenon of County Lines. The aims of this first phase of the research, therefore, was to generate knowledge into what exactly this drug supply model was, gain insight into how officers were interpreting it and those involved, and to understand what responses were being considered in response to it. Undertaking in-depth interviews with a specific group of officers based in an affected 'import' force and tasked with responding to this local drug market development was considered the most appropriate method of achieving this.

From the analysis of the interview data, a core conceptual category of profit maximisation was developed. This was used by officers as a way of framing and understanding County Lines activity and is discussed in detail in the first half of this chapter. Discussions related to this conceptual category include the nature of the supply model, the reasons for the harms associated with it, and its impact on local populations. Valuable data were also gleaned in relation to policing strategies and tactics being used or proposed as a response to these groups. Building on these insights into the phenomenon, the latter part of this chapter details these initial policing responses and the officer's perspectives of them. In particular, it focuses on

the emphasis on partnership working and a potential focus on harm rather than strictly supply reduction. The chapter concludes by highlighting the key findings and how this phase lays the methodological and theoretical foundations for subsequent empirical investigation.

6.2 The business of County Lines: Profit maximisation

A dominant interpretation expressed by all the officers and which consistently permeated the interviews was that County Lines groups operated very similarly to a legitimate business. The dominant, if not sole, motivator behind the emergence of these groups in their area and those participating within them was the overwhelming desire to not just generate profit but maximise their potential for doing so. The prevalence of this narrative and the way it was consistently drawn upon as an explanatory framework suggested the officers considered this as an appropriate and productive way to interpret the issue. It was therefore through this lens of County Lines groups being, or at least resembling, a business that they sought to understand and explain much of the key defining features of this supply activity:

> *"Like I said, it's run like a business and it's a pretty horrible business, it ruins people's lives. But that's what they do and they're pretty much dead set on achieving it."* – [Detective Sergeant]

One defining element of this profit maximisation framework used by the officers was explaining the migratory practices of County Lines groups. The decision to deal in their smaller rural, market or coastal towns was viewed as being the result of a considered choice of where these groups believed they would have the best chance of being able to infiltrate and take over local drug markets with least resistance from local dealers. Despite other smaller cities likely having a larger potential customer base, it was suggested that County Lines groups judged drug markets in smaller towns to be easier to take over and become the main source of supply, and therefore being riper for profit. In a manner perhaps similar to the conventional business practice of hostile takeovers, it was believed that rather than simply migrating to areas where larger numbers of potential customers were located - which at face value would be the most attractive - they instead took a more considered approach

of weighing up where they would stand the best chance of taking over the drug market and becoming the dominant source of supply. In particular, officers believed this decision was influenced by how organised and established local suppliers were, and their willingness and ability to mount hostile responses to outsider dealers moving into their area:

> *"There's no established dealers in places like Mayberry, Hillwood. They can come in and start dealing pretty much straight away. Trying to get into a city like Whitevale would be harder though, I think a couple of the ones from the Met [London] have tried and there's been some violence in response."* – [Police Constable]

Another notable feature of using the framework of profit maximisation to explain County Lines characteristics was their choice of heroin and crack as substances to deal. While some officers acknowledged the notion that the markets for these drugs had become 'saturated' in their origin cities (Windle and Briggs, 2015a), it was believed they were specifically chosen because of their convenient physical form. Being easily packaged in small 'wraps' meant that they could be transported easily and inconspicuously in relatively large amounts. This was deemed clearly beneficial for the outreach County Lines supply model involving the transportation of drugs from one area to another and often young people transporting drugs on their own by train or other forms of public transport. In contrast, to transport a substance such as cannabis in this manner was considered practically and financially unfeasible, especially in the quantities required to match the levels of profit associated with heroin and crack:

> *"It's usually wrapped up in tiny little wraps. Some of them plug it, you know what that means? Yeah. Or they might just have it in a bag."* – [Detective Sergeant]

The choice of heroin and crack was also considered to be related to the perceived characteristics and vulnerabilities associated with local users of these substances. County Lines dealers were viewed as making an informed, calculated judgement to deal in these drugs as they provided a more complicit and dependable clientele,

allowing for a more robust and efficient business model. In one respect this related to the belief that the heroin and crack using population were more regular and prolific customers, providing greater returns for the time they spent in satellite towns. But officers also suggested that dealing in these specific drugs afforded 'out of town' dealers greater exposure to more vulnerable, problematic local users who were socially excluded, lacking in social and 'street' capital (Sandberg, 2008) and unwilling to report victimisation to the police. These local market actors would then be prime candidates for cuckooing, considered a crucial objective in establishing a well-organised and financially efficient County Line operation, whilst also helping to reduce the risks of generating law enforcement attention (Spicer et al., 2019). In comparison to servicing, for example, more recreational powder cocaine users (e.g. Salinas, 2018), problematic heroin and crack users were therefore considered to represent a more profitable but also more exploitable population:

> *"Obviously, the users of those [Heroin and Crack] are typically more vulnerable as well. You know, when they come down here they're going to be able to find the ones they can cuckoo pretty sharpish and take advantage of their addictions much more easily in that group."* – [Detective Inspector]

That the officers sought to understand this form of drug supply emerging in their area as being a product of these groups strong desire for financial gain is perhaps unsurprising. Previous research has found similar interpretations of those involved in drug supply from those in law enforcement. The detectives Bacon (2016a, p.220) spent time with, for example, tended to view the dealers they targeted as "business criminals". Discourses surrounding organised crime and drug trafficking more broadly have also commonly centred on the commercial aspects and economic drivers of such activity (Adler, 1985). However, as highlighted by concepts discussed in chapter two such as 'social supply' (Coomber and Moyle, 2014) and 'moral economies' (Wakeman, 2016), much heroin and crack dealing practices at the retail level are not predicated solely on the desire to generate significant profit. Indeed, this has been argued as often being particularly the case in drug markets operating outside of major urban conurbations (Coomber, 2015). It might therefore be

suspected that due to the officers working in lesser urban areas and being less exposed to relatively well structured and organised forms of drug supply, the intensifying influx of more commercial 'outsider' dealers served to instigate this fervent emphasis on profit maximisation. As was indicated throughout many of the interviews, they had already often previously interpreted the less organised local suppliers in a manner closer to the type of organised hierarchical pyramid than was likely the case in reality. It would therefore seem somewhat inevitable that when faced with the emergence of seemingly more commercial County Lines groups they would understand and explain their key features as calculated choices grounded in the desire to be able to perform their outreach business model efficiently and maximise their potential for profit. So-called 'middle England' perceptions of the presence of drugs has previously been reported as being associated with some 'outsiders' bring in (see Girling et al., 1999). Drawing on conceptions of 'purity' and 'danger', the presence of these more organised, unfamiliar supply groups of urban origin therefore appeared to be considered as "matter out of place" (Douglas, 1966, p.33) by local officers in provincial areas.

6.2.1 Marketing and the value of the brand

This overarching framework of profit maximisation also fed into explanations of some of the specific County Lines behaviour that officers had been exposed to during their involvement with recent cases. Comparisons between County Lines groups and legitimate commerce were frequently made, with regular allusions to how the 'out of town' dealers involved imitated conventional, well established business practices. Strikingly, when describing and explaining the activities of these groups, officers themselves also consistently drew upon an array of traditional business concepts and metaphors from industries such as fast food and advertising.

As outlined in chapter three, a defining feature of how County Lines groups operate is the use of a specific phone number that becomes their 'brand' (NCA, 2017). Being integral to their business model, it was noted that these phone lines and the associated brand were guarded vehemently by these dealers and especially the 'elders' controlling the lines in particular.

"There's a massive reluctance for County Lines to change numbers. That's their brand, their business." – [Detective Sergeant]

Officers reported that the use of branding allowed 'out of town' dealers to advertise their business to local customers when attempting to initially establish themselves, but to also develop a reputation. In so doing they would gradually seek to achieve what could be considered brand recognition. Drawing on intelligence from an ongoing case, several officers described how - when some County Lines groups moved into a new area – they would hand out slips of paper with their brand name and phone number to the local heroin and crack user population. This, it was noted, was not dissimilar to the conventional use of business cards or flyers. Local users would then order drugs by phone and collect them at an agreed location stating the name of the brand to the runner. Strictly adhering to this procedure was viewed as making the process of physical transaction smoother while also acting as a further source of protection from police tactics such as test purchases. Buerger (1992) has previously termed such practices as 'Speakeasy' markets, noting how it allows for dealers to open themselves to a larger potential market, while providing at least some form of protection against law enforcement. Alongside the use of cuckooing, the way it was being applied in this context would appear to indicate how non-local County Lines dealers both facilitate the successful functioning of an 'import' market (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992) and how their operations are situated within the 'open' or 'closed' retail market dichotomy (May and Hough, 2004).

Echoing the findings of Coomber and Moyle (2018), despite their reputation for violence, many officers stated that County Lines dealers were popular among the local drug using population. This appeared to be due to two main characteristics common among these supply networks. The first of these was that they were argued to sell superior quality of drugs, with officers firmly believing that both the heroin and crack being sold by 'out of town' dealers was of significantly higher purity than that provided by local dealers. The second of these was their dependability. In comparison to the often less reliable local suppliers and user-dealer networks, County Lines runners were suggested as delivering quickly and at all times of day and night. Again, this is consistent with Coomber and Moyle's (2018) findings who

reported these supply operations and the performance of the runners stationed in the host towns being tightly managed and orchestrated.

Combined, this better quality product and more reliable service, meant brand recognition was argued to be achieved rapidly, with County Lines groups becoming well known and established in the local neighbourhoods in a relatively short amount of time. Any competition from local dealers, if they had not already been scared off by intimidation or acts of violence, was seen to be quickly undermined due to them operating in a more professional and organised manner. Making comparisons with legitimate business as a way of explaining this process, one detective used an analogy from the fast food industry:

> *"It's supply and demand really, isn't it? It's like burgers … who does the best burgers? McDonalds? Burger King? You know, people buy from them because they give them what they want. The reason Wimpy went out of business was because their burgers were shit so people stopped buying."*
> – [Detective Inspector]

Correspondingly, further business-like tactics employed by these groups when first entering a new area in an attempt to 'get their product to market' and quickly establish themselves were also discussed. These included offering cheap introductory prices to new customers as well as incentivising local users to spread the word and promote buying from them among their social groups. This was presented as further evidence of how in a relatively short amount of time, and aided by their deployment of conventional marketing tactics, County Lines groups were able to dominate a local drug market. As one officer recalled:

> *"So, the first one (County Lines case) I helped on was (with) a couple that were dependent on drugs. They'd been given freebies I think, they'd (got) loads of texts trying to get them to buy from them, so you can see how they get so popular with people like that."* – [Police Constable]

Analogies between drug supply practices at various levels of the supply chain and legitimate business have been made by numerous researchers (Adler 1985; Pearson and Hobbs 2001; Ruggiero and South 1995). It should also be noted that branding is

nothing new in the world of drug dealing. Goldstein (1985) reported how this was commonly used by dealers in the New York crack cocaine markets of the early 1980s and how it contributed to incidents of 'systemic' violence (see also Wendel and Curtis, 2000). However, something reported during the interviews which seemingly is more novel, is the adoption of practices more analogous to notions of franchising. Notably, and perhaps adding further insight into the value of an established 'branded' line, several of the detectives discussed how they had recently become aware of the practice of County Lines dealers selling off their line to another group:

> *"A lot of them seem to go down the franchise route, they'll sell off their County Line to someone else who can then use it to deal from, the people that buy it can use the credibility of that line."* - [Detective Inspector]

In addition, it was suspected that many of these groups, if leaving a host town due to fear of law enforcement detection, would look to sell off collated lists of customer phone numbers to others who would then be able to use this to engage in focused advertising and selling to these customers themselves, simultaneously maintaining and perpetuating the 'import' market (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992). Illustrating this with a dramaturgical 'prop' (Goffman, 1959), one detective reached into a pile of paper work on his desk and showed off a list of over 100 telephone numbers that they had recently recovered from a cuckooed property.

Again, the parallels between this practice and the selling of customer data that occur in the legitimate business world are evident. It would appear that not only are County Lines groups financially benefiting from the drug supply itself but, relating back to the notion of profit maximisation, they are actively seeking other ways in which they can profit from the supply industry more broadly. Officers stated that they believed that the groups were collectively aware that such acts served as a way of helping to avoid law enforcement detection:

> *"That makes it harder for us to catch them as well if they're moving it around to different people every few weeks."* – [Police Constable]

The implication, therefore, was that County Lines groups also recognised the mutual benefits of engaging with one another and were prepared to do so if it furthered their ability to generate profit and continue engaging in supply activities.

This is an intriguing notion and something that has rarely been observed or discussed in the wider drug market literature. As illustrated in chapter two, talk of turf wars and predatory violence as opposed to communication and collaboration have dominated both popular and academic perceptions of relations between rival drug dealers (Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007). However, it would be erroneous to state that this type of conduct is wholly without precedent. Zaitch (2005), for example, documented how various migratory dealing groups operating at the same time across Amsterdam peacefully coexisted, recognising the mutually beneficial reasons of doing so. Just how common and organised such behaviour is with regard to County Lines was unclear and something the officers were seeking to pursue. However, the fact that the use of such strategies was argued to make it harder for police to track and arrest County Lines dealers does perhaps add further insight into the challenges faced by crackdown operations, using tactics such as test purchases, in targeting the more commercial and organised suppliers (Coomber et al., 2017).

While these insights into some of the specific activities undertaken by County Lines groups and their similarities to conventional business practices uncover some intriguing and seemingly rather novel drug market behaviour, they are also further demonstrative of how prominent the notion of profit maximisation was in how officers sought to understand and explain their behaviour. The extent that they consistently drew upon these conventional business concepts to make sense of drug market developments could be interpreted theoretically as illustrative of the pervasiveness of neo-liberal discourses and how capitalism embeds itself within the functioning and understandings of everyday life (see Fisher, 2009; Rose and Miller, 2008). But this also likely has practical consequences. It appeared that this way of understanding County Lines was a guiding influence on how the officers believed they should and could respond to them. In particular, officers viewed the importance that County Lines groups placed on their brand and retaining their phone number as a weakness that they could use to their advantage. While viewing them as

characteristic of these groups, it was also this resemblance to legitimate business that was regarded as the chief way in which they could disrupt them.

6.2.2 The threat of County Lines: Youth exploitation

While interpreting County Lines groups through this profit maximisation lens allowed officers to understand and explain some of their specific supply practices, it was also used to provide an understanding of some of their other well recognised and harmful characteristics. An example of this included the involvement of young people, something that officers were keen to stress made County Lines an especially pernicious drug supply methodology. Again, firmly rooted in the notion of profit maximisation, the recruitment of young people as runners was interpreted as being a way for the County Lines 'Top Boys', to reduce the risk of being caught and to be able to pay those working for them relatively minimal sums of money. Some officers recounted their experiences of talking with some of the young runners they had arrested, and how it often became apparent that many had been coerced into becoming involved or entrapped through forms of debt bondage into working for these groups with little remuneration:

> *"What we've seen is that they'll say to them 'I've just given you new trainers, I've given you a new phone, what you need to do now is to take this package across town for me.' So, they'll give them a package to take across, say for example a kilo of something, and when he gets to the other end they'll say, 'that's only half a kilogram I got, so you owe me a kilo and so you'll have to work that off.' But they'll never work that off. So that's how they keep them in check."* – [Detective Sergeant]

Behaviour such as the recruitment and exploitation of young people conforms to the stereotypical 'pusher myths' (Coomber, 2006) that surround drug dealers, and the image of them as predatory, dangerous and unscrupulous individuals who prey on the young and the vulnerable. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the 'black and white' world outlook commonly attributed to police culture (Reiner, 2010), these notions were frequently present during the interviews, with County Lines dealers rendered as a threat to vulnerable people and otherwise law-abiding local communities.

Several officers talked in a morally outraged manner of a recent case that was subsequently picked up by (or perhaps fed to) the local media where:

> *"...a child was being used to sell the drugs and had been brought up from another county, they were a missing person in that county and then was brought up here and used. They put him into a school uniform from the local area, so he would blend in and could sell drugs more easily that way."* – [Police Constable]

It was striking that it was this specific act of putting a young 'out of town' runner in a local school uniform that was picked up on and emphasised across several interviews as being particularly shocking. This may be understood as being due to the symbolic qualities such an incident possesses. It is of course the threat to children that drugs and those that supply them pose that is consistently one of the main tools emphasised in 'drug warrior' discourse (Coomber 2006; Naddelman, 2004). The wearing of the school uniform appeared to underline just how young those engaging in dealing were, the damage to their 'purity' (Douglas, 1966) and the perceived risk that these outsider, commercially orientated drug dealing groups may then pose to local school children. The fact that County Lines groups would go to such lengths as to purchase a local school uniform and put a young runner in it also illustrated just how far they are prepared to go in order to facilitate their drug dealing operations and profit maximisation goals. In this sense, therefore, the pusher myths and concept of profit maximisation appeared to reinforce one another, with the lengths these groups were willing to go to further their financial gain being suggestive of the extent to which they would be prepared to engage in other forms of harmful stereotypical drug dealer behaviour.

6.2.3 County Lines violence: Instrumental or expressive?

Regarding a second prominent County Line 'externality' (Caulkins, 2002) and evocative of another core feature of Coomber's (2006) 'pusher myths', it was common, especially during the early stages of many interviews, for officers to stress how County Lines groups were comprised of highly dangerous, 'evil' gang members who routinely engaged in sadistic acts of violence. Graphic examples provided from

recent cases included the pouring of boiling water on a runner's genitals and the kidnapping and fatal stabbing of a local drug user. These cases and the way they were presented again conformed to stereotypical depictions of drug dealers being extremely violent, willing to use weapons and perhaps even deriving some pleasure from committing such acts. When discussing violence, some officers also engaged in 'gang talk' (Hallsworth and Young, 2008), with its particular use in connection with this drug supply model represented as being a cultural product of the supposed emergence of highly organised gangs in major British cities, similar in nature to those well documented in the US.

> *"The violence comes from gangland culture, they've got a big knife crime problem up in London you know, it's much more accepted up there so they bring it down here as well."* – [Detective Sergeant]

Despite this, however, when probing into some of these specific violent incidents in more detail, slightly altered and more nuanced stories were revealed. Rather than violence being spectacular acts of expressive behaviour, it instead appeared to be almost exclusively deployed by 'out of town' dealers for instrumental purposes. As opposed to being a product of sadistic tendencies or cultural norms, the use of violence was intrinsically linked to furthering their drug dealing business and, once again, profit maximisation. Most commonly, acts of County Lines violence were seen to be related to the drug debts accrued by local users or particularly 'parasitic' forms of cuckooing (Spicer et al., 2019). It was therefore this population that seemingly bore the brunt of this violence. Further details concerning the aforementioned fatal stabbing was one example of this:

> *"They didn't mean to kill him. They often do that sort of thing to get them to pay up, you know. Sometimes do it in their bum so they think of them when they sit down. They stabbed him in the leg because it was a big piece of flesh, they thought it would just hurt him a lot and send a message, they didn't realise they were going to hit an artery and have him bleed out."* – [Police Constable]

A further example of this included acts or threats of serious violence deployed by County Lines groups towards local dealers when initially moving in to the area. These were initially presented as being illustrative of how the local drug market had radically changed due to the emergence of these foreign and dangerous 'gangland' (Hallsworth, 2013) groups. However, as many of the officers went on to acknowledge, this was typically a short-term occurrence, used instrumentally by County Lines groups to intimidate and ensure compliance from local dealers in order to gain dominance over the drug market. Subsequent acts of violence were then almost always related to the enforcement of drug debts as opposed to violent performances related to status.

Despite officers initially being keen to present high-profile incidents of County Lines related violence as expressive and illustrative of sadistic tendencies fostered by urban street gang involvement, once discussed in detail it therefore arguably appeared more appropriate to interpret these events within the instrumental profit maximisation framework they had constructed to explain other aspects of the 'out of town' dealer's conduct. In many ways, this comes as little surprise. As has long been stressed, but is still seemingly worth reiterating, drug dealers are not a psychopathic sub section of humanity with an intrinsic desire to commit violence (Coomber 2006). In any case, doing so is typically avoided as acts of violence, especially if serious, are likely to generate police attention and be 'bad for business' (Pearson and Hobbs, 2001). As outlined in chapter two, nor can drug market violence simply be explained as being due to the illegality of the environment. In addition to building on wider discussions regarding the interplay between instrumental and expressive acts undertaken by those involved in County Lines (see Storrod and Densley, 2017), these insights therefore undermine the notion that such groups and their activities can be simply explained as products of gangs. As discussed in chapter three, this is backed up by official law enforcement publications that have recognised that County Lines groups are not necessarily 'gang affiliated' (NCA, 2017).

6.2.4 The utility of the profit maximisation framework

While conscious of the importance of remaining critical of how these groups were being interpreted and represented, via the explanatory power that the 'profit

maximisation' framework appears to provide, it is possible to appreicate how those involved in County Lines, the impact on affected 'import' areas and the phenomenon more broadly rests on the drive to maximise financial gains. In addition to insights regarding how this can be understood as a response to market saturation and increasingly more relatively deprived young actors being propelled into drug supply, this is arguably further strengthened where, even where it appeared tempting for violence to be initially depicted in relation to some of the more stereotypical cultural myths that surround drug dealers (Coomber, 2006), viewing these as acts of instrumentalism appeared more grounded in the realities of why they occurred. Fundamental characteristics of County Lines dealers such as their mobility, to key features such as their choice of drug can all then be legitimately explained within the framework of profit maximisation. Indeed, framed in this commercial way it is possible to trace the development of a County Lines operation using conventional business concepts - from the initial stage of aggressive takeovers and the process of setting up shop, to attempting to develop and market the brand, and finally potentially selling their identity, or their client base, to another business.

Linking neatly with this concept of profit maximisation, insights from these interviews outlining the conduct of County Lines groups and their popularity among local user populations indicate Coomber and Moyle's (2018) suggestion that it is appropriate to understand County Lines as evocative of wider legitimate market trends of neoliberal rationality is particularly apt. But it may also be possible to take this analogy further. For example, in a form of 'fetishistic disavowel' (Zizek, 2008), many consumers are uncomfortable with some of *Amazon's* business practices and are aware of the detrimental effects they can have on local vendors and the wider community, yet continue to buy from them due to its convenience and inexpensive products. So too, it would appear, is a similar process undertaken by local drug user populations in relation to County Lines groups, with the availability and quality of their products, heightened by the effective harnessing of marketing strategies, making them a highly attractive option. Understood as a process of subterranean structuration (Stevens, 2011b), these structurally restrained acts of agency may well then be reinforced when, as local dealers continue to drop out of the market or

become amalgamated as part of County Lines operations, these groups gain an increasingly dominant market share, offering local buyers few alternatives and having little incentive to operate in ways that do not create or reduce drug markets harms.

6.3 Policing Responses: Partnership work and signals

It is quite possible that those interviewed may have been keen to present County Lines violence as extreme and spectacular to an 'outsider' researcher (Reiner and Newburn, 2007), perhaps to emphasise the importance of their work, the threat they were up against or even just to make the content of the interviews more interesting. Recourse to forms of 'gang talk' (Hallsworth and Young, 2008) and tales of 'expressive violence' (Copes et al., 2015) may well have been what they thought I as a researcher wanted to here. However, it also became evident that this depiction had also been presented to others and used by the police for instrumental purposes of their own. This was specifically apparent when some officers discussed engaging in outreach work with other agencies in an attempt to make them aware of the issue, stress its severity and threat to the local area, and encourage them to not only work with the police to try and tackle it, but to also take on some responsibilities themselves. As one detective recalled:

> *"I did a little tour, went to adult safeguarding, housing associations and tried to shock them into action a bit. Told them some of the grizzly violent stuff that County Lines have done. I think there's a feeling in Redford of 'it's not happening in my backyard' and people just aren't really that aware of it, so I try to give them a bit of a shock and make them actually start paying attention." –* [Detective Inspector]

Specifically recounting - perhaps even slightly embellishing - some of the most violent County Lines related incidents appeared to be a valuable way for the officers to draw attention to the issue at a local level and generate the engagement and cooperation they were seeking from other agencies. Conforming to concerns of symbolism, there was seemingly an emphasis to take these typically hidden or unfamiliar harms associated with County Lines and expose them so that they serve the purposes of

local 'signal crimes' (Innes, 2014). Stories of extreme, sadistic and expressive forms of violence appeared to serve as valuable recourse for officers, helping them to construct a local drug market 'spectacle' (Edelman, 1988), achieve their aims of raising awareness and communicate with partner agencies.

Indeed, an emphasis placed on engaging with other agencies was prominent throughout the interviews. All of the officers discussed the importance of partnership work in relation to County Lines and the potential benefits that this could bring. It was clear that this form of working had been promoted by senior figures and all of the officers interviewed appeared in favour of pursuing it. Notably, however, the reasons provided for doing so differed between respondents. Some of the detectives suggested that a lot of the work that they as a force were currently undertaking in response to County Lines should actually be covered by other agencies. In particular, engaging with issues such as safeguarding and prevention was viewed as inappropriate police work, and that their role and purpose should instead be purely related to enforcement. In addition to concerns of symbolism, such attitudes correspond with Bacon's (2016a) observations, with detectives viewing multi-agency work and community orientated engagement as 'soft' and departing from the 'proper' representation of police work they sought. The need for partnership work therefore appeared to be less about forming mutually beneficial and productive relationships to reduce the harms present within local drug markets, but more as a way to lessen the load that the police were burdened with so that their time could be freed up to do more 'proper' police work of arresting and detecting 'out of town' dealers:

> *"They've got to come to the table, they've got to start pulling their weight. Social services, for example, there's things they can do but they don't do it...it comes down to resources normally. You know the police are about enforcement really, if others engage with safeguarding then we can focus on arresting and doing what we do best." – [Detective Sergeant]*

In contrast, those officers without a detective function, who were active at the street level, frequently involved in County Line cases and exposed to the impact on locals, discussed the desire to work more closely alongside partner agencies and the

benefits of doing so for not just them as the police, but also for the other agencies and affected individuals. Some talked of how the process of imposing a closure notice on a cuckooed property ran smoother when the relevant housing association was closely involved. By making other agencies aware of what was going on and why this action was being undertaken, they suggested this then allowed organisations to support local residents and the police in the action they sought to take. Specifically with regard to accommodation, these officers stressed the importance of working closely with housing associations to help ensure that those 'vulnerable' individuals who had become embroiled in County Lines activity through cuckooing were not facing charges and were efficiently rehoused:

> *"You know if we're trying to rehouse somebody we can't do that on our own, we need help from [names of housing associations] ... we need to get them working closely with us."* – [Police Constable]

These two perceptions of working with other organisations therefore demonstrate two conflicting, yet somewhat familiar models of police partnership working. The first involves viewing multi-agency work in response to County Lines as a way for the police to delegate certain responsibilities to others and symbolically demarcate what they believed their own and other people's 'jobs' to be. The second involves officers seeking to engage in what can perhaps be considered as more genuine partnership work, where those involved 'play nicely with each other' (O'Neill, 2013). An emphasis is placed on problem solving and actively collaborating in pursuit of mutually beneficial and agreed upon outcomes.

6.3.1 'Another pair of eyes and ears': Working with others in an era of austerity

Beyond these concerns surrounding responsibilities and the role of other organisations, another key driver of partnership work outlined by both the detectives and uniformed officers was the intelligence that they received from these agencies. Both in quantity and quality, having this potential additional source was considered invaluable for helping the police with law enforcement, as well as enabling greater capacity for safeguarding measures. It was suggested that until recently most

relevant organisations and agencies had a lack of awareness regarding County Lines, what it was and, more specifically, its specific implications for local areas. This then provided the motivation for some of the officers to visit other agencies and to attempt to raise awareness. One of the key benefits of doing so was receiving greater amounts of intelligence from staff members within these agencies. This included not just drug supply activity but also potential incidences of cuckooing that may previously have gone unnoticed:

> *"We get a lot of intelligence since we've gone to all of these places, because people are more aware of it now. They're aware that this person might be keeping very different company, or that there might be people in their property that they've never seen before and might be talking on their behalf, even stopping people going in. For example, it could be that a social worker has gone round and they're like, 'oh, no, so and so doesn't want to see you, they're in bed'. So they (The County Lines) may try and put that barrier up, but people are more aware of that now because we've gone around and explained about how County Lines work."* – [Detective Sergeant]

Adopting a rather police-centric view of why the issue of County Lines had emerged, many of the officers were outspoken regarding the reduction of neighbourhood policing, how they believed this had significantly contributed to County Lines flourishing and how this has made it more difficult for them to gain relevant intelligence about their presence in the area and cases of cuckooing. Many suggested neighbourhood policing was sorely needed in helping them to successfully identify County Line activity and effectively safeguard vulnerable populations. By building relationships and becoming familiar with the local community it was suggested that neighbourhood police officers were far more likely *"to pick up on stuff"* and receive information from members of the community during informal and routine neighbourhood policing activities:

> *"If you haven't got neighbourhood policing there then who are people going to say this to? It then becomes far more formal and you're relying on people picking up the phone and ringing someone who they don't know. Whereas if you've got neighbourhood policing in there, you've got someone they're*

familiar with, they're then so much more likely to go and tell you stuff." – [Police Constable]

In an attempt to generate more effective means of safeguarding and increased links with other agencies, officers spoke of how they worked with their communication department to create bespoke materials such as leaflets, which they then provided to different organisations. Those working in housing, for example, were advised to look out for changes in living arrangements or attitudes of tenants. While health workers were encouraged to "*use their professional judgement to help flag this up early*" by noting signs such as individuals visiting GPs or hospitals more regularly or, conversely, consistently missing scheduled appointments. Officers also showed examples of posters and leaflets that they provided to agencies which they encouraged them to put up in their premises as a way to help raise awareness. This was considered as a particularly valuable way of engaging members of the public who were more likely to come into contact with these agencies than they would the police. The guidance in these materials appeared rather broad and applicable to a variety of people experiencing a whole range of issues. For example, signs to look out for in young people included *"Increasingly disruptive or aggressive behaviour"* and *"returning home late"*. It could therefore be considered that these were a somewhat symbolic attempt to not just raise awareness but to demonstrate that they were attempting to respond to this increasingly high-profile issue at a local level. Yet, officers were firmly outspoken that such strategies had the potential for making a positive impact on raising awareness and information generation, in regard to both agency staff and the broader public. Simply having something tangible to present and use to respond to this pressing issue appeared to be enough for many.

Engaging with other agencies in this manner to generate intelligence was viewed by some officers as a pragmatic way of filling the gaps that had been created by the withdrawal of neighbourhood policing in response to funding cuts. Making partner agency staff with a strong presence within communities and a firm knowledge of those within it aware of the threat and signs of County Lines appeared to be one way in which the police sought to generate the type of local information and intelligence traditionally generated by neighbourhood policing. The officers stressed the

importance of specifically involving those working at the ground level, including somewhat unfamiliar actors such as housing maintenance workers who were considered to be in an advantageous position to report signs of County Line activity. Their consistent presence and the relationships they were seen likely to have developed with communities was suggested as making them suitable candidates to fill the role of proxy neighbourhood police officers. Some officers even spoke of how they were actively trying *"to give them a route in through our team so they can add to the reports and stuff",* illustrating just how much of a role they were willing to afford partners and the extent to which they wanted them to contribute to work typically carried out by neighbourhood police. Feeding into wider policing debates, the use of partner agencies to fill this gap fostered by funding cuts could perhaps be viewed as a further development in the 'pluralisation' of policing (Loader, 2000), instigated by how local drug markets were evolving.

6.3.2 Drug services: The difficult partner?

Despite officers generally suggesting that initial recent work with many relevant local agencies had been positive, attempts at engaging with local drug services was discussed as being particularly challenging. Those working in these organisations were viewed as being often sceptical of the police and their motivations. In particular, the implications that engaging with the police might have for their service users was interpreted by the officers as to why they were hesitant to engage with them:

> *"They don't trust us I don't think – we're the [with emphasise] 'POLICE', you know? I think they're worried that we're going to start kicking down their user's doors and stuff – they don't get that it's a safeguarding issue."* – [Detective Sergeant]

Such apparent reticence from the drug services left some officers frustrated, believing their lack of engagement to be irrational and counterproductive. This was compounded given that such agencies were viewed to be in a particularly strong, perhaps even unique, position to engage with the local drug using population, raise awareness of County Lines and help implement safeguarding strategies in response to the threat of 'out of town' dealers. One officer recounted a recent example where

a local drug service had been unwilling to put up leaflets and posters regarding County Lines within their premises. He claimed this was an illustration of them being "*overly difficult*" and acting in a way that was at odds with what he believed their goals should be.

However, other officers spoke about this relationship with drugs services in more empathetic terms. They noted that due to the drug services traditional goals, their emphasis on support and adoption of harm reduction principles, it was unrealistic for police to believe that drug services would automatically accept them as being a natural ally regarding the general wellbeing of their service users. The issue of trust, the importance of this to drug services and how this could potentially be undermined by the presence, whether explicit or implicit, of the police was also recognised:

> *"I'm not saying that they're not helpful, it's just that it's a sort of culture change for them, and us really, to try to and work together, when they obviously have that trust relationship with whoever they're seeing and to keep them on board, keep them coming back and making appointments they need.... I don't know. They're concerned about any sharing of information really."* – [Police Constable]

Despite the clear frustration displayed by some officers, the presence of these counter narratives suggests that there is some understanding within the police as to why drug services have been broadly hesitant to engage with them formally or allow for what some officers seemingly viewed as more informal measures such as the putting up of leaflets in their premises. It was noteworthy that the more empathetic view was carried by uniformed officers, with the voices of frustration often emanating from those detectives that had interpreted partnership work as means of fostering more 'proper' police work. In addition to the lasting impact of 'drug war' policies and how they have historically been implemented, this then stresses the continued importance of 'cop culture' and officer's perceptions of what they and others should be doing in response to issues, in understanding the realities of drug police work.

6.3.3 A divergence from prohibition?

This attempt to generate greater engagement and collaboration with drug services feeds into a final but important notion regarding how the officers were seeking to respond to the issue. Notable in the context of alternative forms of drug policing (Bacon, 2016a) was how this diverged, and was someway in tension with, the prohibition centric ways of policing drugs and drug offenders. It was striking that at the start of nearly all of the interviews, when responding to a broad introductory question regarding County Lines, nearly all of the officers began by saying something similar to:

> *"(Sighs) To be quite honest drugs have been around since the year dot, haven't they? They're not going away anytime soon."* – [Detective Sergeant]

Somewhat aligning with arguments made by those in favour of legalisation (Woods, 2018), County Lines was viewed as just one – albeit particularly pernicious - further development in the illicit drug economy, just as there had been in the past and would be in the future. Despite often falling back on homogenised, stereotypes of drug dealers, officers appeared aware of the capacity for adaptation and evolution. So called 'drug warrior' rhetoric (Leishman and Wood, 2000) promoting prohibitionist goals of living in a drug free world were non-existent. In fact, some officers were outspoken in pointing out what they believed were the flaws of 'traditional' drugs policing. In particular, some were sceptical of whether law enforcement was the appropriate response to drug offences and often highlighted the cyclical process of arresting low level local offenders, only to do so again soon after:

> *"What we've always done is arrest and lock up isn't it. But instead I think you've got to think, you know especially with the users, there's probably a problem there, and by arresting and locking up all the time is that solving that problem? It's probably just going to happen again."* – [Detective Sergeant]

While there was some variance present, such a position was generally consistent among those interviewed and appeared to be feeding into how they were deciding to respond to County Lines. The significant use of discretion was viewed as applicable and appropriate not just when engaging with those that might be guilty of possession

offences, but also for some who might technically by guilty of having their premises to be used as cuckooed 'nests':

> *"A real tool for us, I believe, is discretion. You know if I or any of my officers are speaking to a user we're not compelled to search him. If they're telling us about something that's going on, about someone or them themselves being cuckooed that's what we want, we're not going to have any desire to search them or arrest them because we suspect they've got something on them."* – [Detective Inspector]

At least in principle, those local users characterised as vulnerable and who had been caught up in County Line activity, either through undertaking labour or having been cuckooed, were discussed as being victims and not appropriate candidates for law enforcement action to be taken against. Instead, many officers stated that their main aim was to actively safeguard these drug using individuals and prevent them from being harmed:

> *"I suppose classic policing is, you know, somebody's dealing drugs, we deal with them...that's it - thanks very much and we move on to the next. That was our old, you know, policing style. But then County Lines, the way they work, they will look to exploit people who have got [drug] habits and so although they're committing crime they're still potentially vulnerable. So, it's identifying what we can put in place in order to assist them … to try and sort of bubble wrap them, if that makes sense."* – [Detective Sergeant]

Indeed, the notion of preventative work was specifically stressed by several officers who voiced their desire to work more 'upstream' alongside other agencies to try and prevent incidents such as cuckooing happening in the first place, rather than responding to them or setting actions in place after they had occurred. One officer argued that those affected by County Lines should not be viewed as isolated incidents but were part of a broader and intensifying local problem of people becoming socially excluded and vulnerable to exploitation. Drawing on Desmond Tutu's famous analogy he described that, as the police:

"We've got more and more drawn in to pulling people out of the river. Our department now are wanting to set up camp at the point in which people are falling in the river, whereas I want to try and stop them from even walking to the river in the first place." – [Inspector]

Yet, despite these arguably welcome ambitions that prioritised reducing harm, many officers were acutely aware that treating local drug users as victims and using resources to safeguard them would likely be viewed negatively by many sections of the wider community. One detective estimated that it would probably be:

"fifty/fifty in the general public about who would be in favour of us spending our time and resources trying to stop users being victimised." – [Detective Sergeant]

Others discussed how, despite being treated as victims if embroiled in County Lines activity, many would already be involved in other forms of offending such as acquisitive crime, adding further complexity and potentially hampering their capacity to treat them as victims. Some also noted that this was challenging in cases of cuckooing that diverged from the classic 'parasitic nest invading' (Spicer et al., 2019) where local users had been initially willing for County Line dealers to enter their residence or were reluctant to engage with officers.

Finally, demonstrating further potential for alternative approaches to be undertaken, when discussing their overall aims in relation to the policing of local drug markets it was also striking, even when talking about dealers, how this was again seemingly in contrast with notions of prohibition. For officers, concerns were frequently less about the drugs and more about the harms associated with the supply. Taking what one officer described as a "*pragmatic approach*", it was suggested that to significantly reduce levels of drug supply in the area was unlikely to be achievable. Instead, emphasis was placed on trying to reduce the multiple aforementioned harms associated with County Lines.

"Well you have to be realistic, are we going to prevent drug dealing? No, it's always going to be there. Are we going to stop County Lines coming down to? Probably not, no I think they'll keep coming down whatever.

What I am really concentrated on is preventing the violence and exploitation that comes out of this. That's what success would look like for me. I don't set myself up to fail." – [Detective Sergeant]

Combined with the discussions around responses to users, it was therefore notable that officers were prepared to use their discretion to recognise the vulnerabilities of those affected by County Lines, especially for those who would be guilty of drug offences beyond purely possession if the 'law on the books' was strictly followed, viewing this as an important way of responding to the harms of County Lines. This, alongside the recognition of what is achievable with regard to levels of supply, therefore indicated a potential step towards incorporating harm reduction principles into drug policing practices in response to County Lines.

6.4 Conclusion

Through the viewpoints of police officers initially tasked with responding to the issue in one affected force area, this chapter has provided an opening empirical exploration into the world of County Lines in affected 'import' areas, the associated evolutions in provincial drug markets and how this is being interpreted at a local level. The core analytic category of profit maximisation provides important insight into the machinations and defining features of the drug supply model. While explanations of deviance predicated solely on the desire for material gain are restricted in that they overlook the critical roles of status and meaning in individual's lives (Bourgois 2003) there would appear utility in situating the characteristics, motivations and overarching understanding of County Lines in relation to this concept. Perhaps most importantly, however, its prominence illustrates a key way that officers tasked with responding to it were understanding the issue. As well as interplaying with Douglas' (1966) idea of dirt, and concepts such as 'pusher myths' (Coomber, 2006) and 'gang talk' (Hallsworth and Young, 2008), through this concept it would appear possible to understand the fears associated with these outside groups moving in and developing an increasing presence in their area. The evolution of the 'local' heroin and crack markets into 'import' markets, the increased commercialism within them and the associated harms to local actors and wider

communities stresses the importance of understanding and appreciating the impact of County Lines on local areas and how this feeds into how the phenomenon is interpreted.

Given the relatively small, albeit specifically targeted sample, it is important to recognise the limitations of this initial phase of the research. However, for the purpose of this thesis, the findings provide an important foundation for further empirical and theoretical investigation. The insights regarding how officers were intending on responding to it prove particularly compelling. The implications of understanding these groups as dangerous, commercially orientated unfamiliar outsiders serve as particularly notable. This would suggest a recourse to symbolic responses, especially when combined with ever increasing attention given to the issue. However, the indication that the police were approaching the issue in a way that diverges from the rules of strict prohibition alongside themes of partnership working suggest more nuanced, pragmatic responses also coming to the fore. As outlined in chapter five, from this initial empirical exploration, an agenda is therefore set for analysis in the following two chapters that seeks to build upon these insights.

7.0 Novel tactics, familiar methods and the role of symbolism: Localised responses to County Lines

7.1 Introduction

Building methodologically and empirically from the previous chapter, this second findings chapter presents ethnographic data and analysis of local policing responses to the emergence of County Lines. Because of the perceived novel nature of this drug supply model and the prominence of these groups, over the course of the fieldwork, at both a national and local level policing strategies and tactics were devised to respond to County Lines and associated issues such as cuckooing. Throughout, I observed many of these responses as they were introduced. I was able to explore how they were viewed by officers, observe how they were put into practice and analyse some of their outcomes. Broadly, these responses can be categorised into two main forms. First were those that were specifically bespoke to the issue of County Lines. Introduced and promoted at the national level, local officers had to interpret these tactics and decide if or how to use them. Second were those policing responses driven by the desires of local teams and senior officers, such as crackdown operations and 'days of action' undertaken in specific affected towns. These more familiar, traditional forms of drug policing were therefore applied or adapted to the context of their evolving local drug markets.

For both of these forms, the chapter presents data and analysis on two specific and prominent policing responses. For the bespoke responses these are the 'Drug Dealing Telecommunication Restriction Order' tactic and the pursuit of Modern Slavery convictions. For the traditional responses, these are 'crackdown operations' and 'days of action'. Throughout, the findings are contextualised by drawing on some of

the conceptual drug policing ideas raised in chapter four. The perspective of applying harm reduction principles to the policing of drug markets (Bacon, 2016a) is used as a general lens for analysing how, if at all, these responses conform to some of these more nuanced ideas and aims. Most prominently, however, it applies the 'symbolic policing' perspective (Coomber et al., 2017) as a conceptual framework to these approaches and seeks to develop it. In addition to the external communicative properties of these diverse forms of policing activity as originally discussed by Coomber et al. (2017), from the 'insider' ethnographic vantage point it also explores the notion of symbolism internally within the police themselves.

7.2 Put on hold: The case of the DDTRO

During the research period, at a national level, one of the most high-profile bespoke responses to County Lines has been to provide the police with a new power to shut down mobile phone lines suspected of being used to facilitate drug dealing activities. As part of the Digital Economy Act (2017), this allows the police to apply for a 'Drug Dealing Telecommunications Restriction Order' (DDTRO) to disconnect suspected phone lines and put a drug operation out of business. The introduction of this power was heavily promoted by politicians and senior officials. The then Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, stated that it "demonstrates this Government's determination to crack down on gangs and sends a very clear message that we will not tolerate this despicable criminal activity" (GOV.UK, 2017). Presented as something of a flagship tactic, it was a response that attempted to illustrate a political commitment to eliminating the practice of County Lines.

Immediately noticeable in the very early stages of the fieldwork was eager anticipation of this new power among officers. Having recently been announced and suggested as imminently available, expectation was palpable. In an initial meeting regarding the focus of my fieldwork it was suggested that, as they would likely be looking to implement a DDTRO imminently, I should attempt to follow the process and its success. Detectives, uniformed officers and intelligence analysts all spoke in expectant, upbeat tones of how this could potentially represent *the* answer to the problem of County Lines and the challenges of responding to it. As one noted:

"I know it's definitely something we want to pursue. It just makes sense doesn't it? We can start [causing] some really big disruption for them." – [Uniformed officer]

As a tactic it appeared to meet many of the officer's informal criteria of being a pragmatic and intuitive additional drug policing tool that could help them achieve their aims. At this local level it was also seen as recognition that the challenges they were encountering with regard to County Lines were being acknowledged by those higher up in the police and government. Indeed, it might be suspected that the granting of the DDTRO power arose on the back of notions discussed in the previous chapter regarding the centrality of the phone line to the County Lines supply methodology, the role of the associated 'brand' and its wider importance in relation to the profit-orientated business model.

Yet, as the first few weeks of the fieldwork passed, little progress on using the power was evident and the initial enthusiasm of officers subsided. While I was keen to pursue this novel research opportunity, informal enquiries on the matter were typically met with vague responses. This did not appear to be due to me as an outsider being 'kept in the dark' (Rowe, 2007); rather, many officers evidently did not know themselves. Typical responses recorded in my field notes included:

"Ah no sorry mate I don't really have a clue what's going on with all that at the moment." – [Uniformed Officer]

Others commented that they had heard concerns that use of the DDTRO power could provoke 'blue on blue activity', such that switching off a phone line may disrupt an ongoing investigation by another force. There was also the suggestion that it had been difficult to communicate with mobile phone network providers about the power, especially amid concerns about what their staff should say to a County Lines dealer enquiring why their phone was no longer working.

It was only after several months, when the DDTRO had been piloted by another police force that talk of its use resurfaced. However, in contrast to the initial enthusiasm, there was now little appetite to use it. As outlined by the force's designated point of

contact for the power, reticence appeared to stem from practicalities surrounding its use, which were not what had been anticipated:

> *"I think it's not going to be as effective as we wanted it to be. So in September 2017 we should have had it up and running with the NCA leading, but that didn't happen. We've just had some guidance documents, like a policy on how it should work, and I've read through it and it's actually unworkable and really expensive. So, what they're suggesting is that a force sees a line that they're not happy with, they do a huge amount of work around the phone and understanding its use. They then fill out some documentation and put it up to the ROCU, who then do the same. Then they put it up to the National Crime Agency who look at it, then maybe give it the all clear. Then it goes back to the ROCU. Then it goes back to the force, who've got to redo some of that work because it will have been a few weeks since they've put it in, and then they've got to end up going to one of three or four courts in the country that can look at it (sighs). And it's just nonsense, Jack. Because actually what we're looking at really is some relatively low-end bunch of idiots with machetes dealing a bit of drugs. We're not looking at terrorists. And the format that they've produced is some sort of 'Rolls Royce' format which is based on taking something out significantly more than a County Line. And it'll cost a fortune, it's incredibly bureaucratic and everything else. Whereas I don't think the legislation intended for that to happen. I think we've ended up putting our own layers of bureaucracy onto it through legal services and speaking to different solicitors. It's just nonsense really."* – [Senior Detective]

Far from being the invaluable, bespoke resource that officers had originally envisaged, the process of applying for a DDTRO was therefore instead perceived to be overly complex, bureaucratic and arduous. Given the emphasis placed on action and a disdain for paperwork, this negative reaction was perhaps illustrative of enduring signs of police culture (Loftus, 2009). However, attributing it to this alone would be a superficial analysis and overlook some of the more pressing concerns raised by officers. It was generally accepted by officers that a rigorous application process for a DDTRO was necessary to avoid any potential 'blue on blue' activity or

other unintended consequences and was therefore a necessary evil. As one officer put it:

> "Imagine if we got it wrong and shut down a Doctor's phone who was on call or something – fucking hell!" - [Police Officer]

It was not, therefore, simply the perceived administrative burden that was central to reservations, but the duration it would take and how this could severely restrict their ability to achieve their desired results. The inability to quickly apply for and obtain a DDTRO meant that there was a perception that the hope of launching sustained, coordinated and effective attacks on the numerous County Lines operations in the force area were dashed. The original excitement of putting these groups out of business were soon a distant memory.

7.2.1 A blunt tool

In addition to the general lack of enthusiasm regarding the practicalities of applying for a DDTRO, there was also an arguably stronger resignation that it was unlikely to be the answer to the problem they were after. Perhaps stemming from the increasing numbers of County Lines operating in the force area, their resilience to the police's initial enforcement efforts, and the sustained issues emanating from their presence, a belief that quickly grew was that a DDTRO was ultimately a blunt tool. Instead of being the panacea to this new form of drug supply and the associated problems manifesting in their local area as originally hoped, there was a recognition that it was ultimately unlikely to be a decisive solution:

> "It's also not going to stop them dealing. So, it's probably not a stand-alone tactic. You know so if we've got the XXXX [drug] line working out of XXXX [town] and we want to make XXXX [town] absolutely unpalatable for them to work in, we're going to take out all their key players, we're going to warn off their local dealers, we're going to get word out on the street that we're not happy with that line, and we're also going to turn off the phone. So, we're going to do numerous things to make it unpalatable for them. So that has potential. But if you think as a stand-alone tactic it's going to work, well it's not. It'll just be an inconvenience for them, which might just last a couple of

days. It's just one small part of the bigger picture. If they've got a phone list, they could quite easily pick up a 'pay as you go' phone the next day, input all the numbers back on the phone, then just send out a text message saying, 'here's the new XXXX line'. And that's the same as any of our friends who change their mobile, you get a text message saying here's my new number, so you delete the old one and you put the new one in. And if it takes us six weeks to turn a phone line off because of the bureaucracy then they've got plenty of time with that phone. And, actually, it makes it cleaner for them as well if they keep changing their phones. In terms of benefit versus resource, I think it's probably easier for them to change their phone line than it will be for us to turn the phone off. And it's not going to change their behaviour doing that anyway." – [Senior Detective]

Officers therefore recognised that even if a successful application was made for a DDTRO, it appeared to offer little means of addressing the problem of illicit supply. Despite the centrality of the phone line to the supply methodology, successfully shutting down an active line was considered an inconvenience at best and highly unlikely to prevent the groups from continuing to deal.

Perhaps more importantly, however, when viewed through the perspective of applying harm reduction principles to local drug markets, this tactic seemingly has little capacity to address the harmful 'externalities' (Caulkins, 2002) of these supply groups. As recognised by many of the officers, and illustrated at the end of the above quote, shutting down a supply line is unlikely to lead to a beneficial change in drug dealer behaviour and a reduction in the types of harm associated with County Lines. There is no reason to believe, for example, that it will encourage them to cease cuckooing the homes of vulnerable people or committing acts of 'systemic' violence (Goldstein, 1985). Instead, by setting its sights solely on seeking to hamper a drug supply group's ability to deal, this tactic appears little more than an extension of prohibitionist inspired, supply reduction responses. As such, the 'zero sum game' critique (Caulkins, 2002) levelled at such policing activities outlined in chapter four arguably applies, with some minimal level of disruption being realistically the best

possible outcome, and with little to no capacity for reducing the harmful drug market conditions that have made the emergence of County Lines such a concern.

7.2.2 The DDTRO power as symbolic

In addition to its practical challenges, the case of the DDTRO power and how it was viewed by officers at the local level does demonstrate some important aspects of the symbolism of responses to County Lines. Beyond how drug policing places an emphasis on sending out messages and communicating 'signals' to outsiders as discussed by Coomber et al. (2017), in particular it highlights the role of this internally to the police as an organisation. The initial enthusiasm from local officers who responded positively to the announcement of its imminent introduction, suggests they are themselves not immune to being drawn into what was ultimately a drug law enforcement 'spectacle' (Edelman, 1988). Constructed in a form of drug policing "word work" (Collison, 1995 p.198), the tactic and its potential was bestowed and promoted by politicians and senior officials who would ultimately not be involved in the use of the power themselves. During my time with officers, such officials and their 'meddling' in police work were regularly discussed with the type of disdain frequently reported by other police researchers (see Reiner 2010, p.125). Yet, notable during the fieldwork was the fact that this spectacle *was,* at least initially, bought into by the officers. As has been shown by previous policing responses to drug market issues (see Maher and Dixon, 1999), by doing so this perpetuates the idea of prohibitionist strategies being the expected, most appropriate, and achievable responses to drug market issues, but which continue to fail both in terms of prohibition and harm reduction aims. This observation could therefore perhaps be explained as akin to a form of 'fetishistic disavowel' (Zizek, 2008), whereby police officers did not *want* to know what their own experiences and the general history of drug policing would suggest the likely success of using this power would be. Instead, similar to Linneman's (2016) observations regarding the meth epidemic in the US, it might have been more comfortable to buy into familiar responses conforming to prohibitionist ideals and logic.

Concluding how the introduction of the DDTRO can be understood as fundamentally revolving around symbolism, by the end of the fieldwork period, talk of this new

power was limited to it being contrasted to more popular, conventional policing tactics. In comparison to a DDTRO, traditional tactics were suggested as requiring far less effort to implement, but likely to be equally if not more effective. Increased use of stop and search was almost universally championed as something that would be of great value. Others included the use of warrants on properties suspected of being used by these groups. These were understood not just as being "quick, cheap and easy" (see Bacon, 2016a p.208), but also capable of generating significant results:

> "An inspector can give orders for a property to be checked, big searches that sort of stuff. Those can happen pretty much immediately and are often far more intrusive than just shutting a phone line down." – [Detective]

Notably, in stark contrast to the initial positive emphasis and heightened expectation, the use of the new DDTRO power was also instead dismissed as something that would be done primarily to look good when the force was inspected. Tracing how it was perceived from the start to the end of the fieldwork, this broader process of the shifting meaning and significance attributed to DDTRO therefore almost went full circle. From senior national officials originally bestowing this power to local officers, having seemingly recognised the scale and nature of the County Lines issue and the challenges encountered by local police forces, the fate of the power concluded with it being suggested that if it was to be taken out, it would be done primarily as a somewhat superficial 'symbolic' demonstration to outside scrutineers that they were performing drug policing in the manner expected of them.

7.3 From 'pushers' to 'enslavers': County Lines as Modern Slavery

While not bespoke in the same manner as the DDTRO power, a second novel tactic that has emerged at national level is to encourage prosecuting senior County Lines dealers under the Modern Slavery Act 2015. This is a notable divergence from the traditional recourse of drug supply related prosecutions under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Closely aligned with dominant discourses surrounding County Lines, attempts at Modern Slavery prosecutions highlights the centrality of the notions of 'exploitation' and 'vulnerability' in shaping how the issue is viewed and how it should

be responded to (Robinson et al., 2018; Spicer, et al., 2019). During the fieldwork, I first became aware of this development when I was invited to attend a Home Office briefing where it was being promoted. I subsequently discussed it informally with officers during the fieldwork and it was openly alluded to in media outlets soon after (see, for example, Swindon Advertiser, 2017). Notably, at the end of the fieldwork, the first example of its use by a police force in this context was covered heavily in the national media (see Guardian, 2018).

Beyond being viewed as an appropriate response to the County Lines problem, the core justification from senior officials for using this legislation appeared to be underpinned by a belief that those prosecuted for such offences would be viewed highly unfavourably during their term of imprisonment and given a 'tough time' by fellow inmates. Being convicted for these specific offences was perceived to have very different connotations to 'regular' drug dealing and supply related crimes, the latter more likely to be considered a badge of honour, rite of passage and way to enhance what Harding (2014) has described as 'street capital' (see also, Sandberg, 2008). In contrast, officers reported how it was relayed to them that a Modern Slavery conviction was less 'criminally respectable', afforded less gravitas and would likely lead to a tougher experience of prison.

When viewed through the perspective of harm reduction principles, the promotion of this tactic proves intriguing. In contrast to the DDTRO power, the underlying principle of pursuing alternative forms of criminal convictions to discourage particularly problematic drug dealer behaviour could be considered to conform to these principles and the blueprint sketched out by Bacon (2016a). Referring back to Dorn and South's (1990, p.186) suggestion that those involved in drug policing should pragmatically ask themselves *What sort of markets do we least dislike, and how can we adjust the control mix so as to push markets in the least undesired direction?"*, targeting drug supply behaviour that can be considered as forms of Modern Slavery would likely be considered a priority. As a drug policing response it is therefore not grounded in prohibitionist notions of supply reduction, solely directing attention on trying to prevent dealing. Instead, by explicitly focusing on harmful externalities and

behaviour change it can arguably be thought of as analogous to elements of focussed deterrence strategies (Braga et al., 2018).

Yet, while this approach shifts from the narrow confines of rigid prohibitionist aims, on matters of theoretical coherence and practicality, this tactic would ultimately also appear flawed. After being briefed on using the tactic, a detective summarised its promotion, revealing how it was being perceived by those such as himself at the local level who were being encouraged to pursue it. There appeared to be significant scepticism regarding the fundamental rationale that those convicted of Modern Slavery would be stigmatised:

> *"There was loads and loads of talk about using Modern Slavery. And I think that's what some of the politicians, and some of the think tanks are thinking that this is how they'll be able to prevent them from targeting the vulnerable. I mean, the theory is fine. Their theory, or at least seems to be, is that the police charge people with some form of human trafficking or Modern Slavery offences, and they believe that the individuals charged with that offence would be so tarnished among their fellow drug dealers so that when they went to prison they would be picked on because they've been charged with that certain offence. Personally, I think that's pretty naive. People are doing the same thing. What's on the charge sheet… it doesn't make them a paedophile, you know. It doesn't make them rapists of young boys or anything like that. It just means they've been moving young kids around and taking advantage of locals or whatever. I don't actually think it will make a spot of difference on the prisoner."* – [Senior Detective]

Indeed, despite attempts throughout the fieldwork, it was not possible to identify any evidence base for the assumption made by senior officials about stigma being attached to offenders. However, while viewing dealers as 'the lowest of the low' and suitable to be morally denounced, officers themselves typically recognised that it would appear at best to be built on shaky foundations. As stressed in the above quote, the notion that inmates would base their opinion of others on what offence they were charged with rather than on their actual offence would indeed appear naïve. In fact, even if inmates were explicitly made aware that others had been

150

charged with Modern Slavery offences, this is unlikely to engender suitable moral outrage. Likely to be well versed on life 'on road' (Hallsworth, 2013) or the wider illicit economy (Hobbs, 2013), fellow inmates may well have engaged in drug supply, or been exposed to it at a young age themselves. The fact that someone has been prosecuted for recruiting young people into their supply operation is therefore unlikely to be overly surprising, or warrant adverse reactions. Similarly, for cuckooing, just as in wider society problematic drug users are unlikely to be viewed favourably or afforded sympathy by dealers or the wider prison population (Simmonds and Coomber, 2009). Users of heroin and crack have frequently been the target of brutal and humiliating expressive violence from other offenders in attempts to assert a clear moral distinction (Copes et al., 2015). Within prisons, ethnographic research has also found such users to be generally held in contempt, which when coupled with a culture of individual responsibility means that little sympathy is likely to be on offer (see Crewe, 2005). Again, therefore, the proposition that offenders would consider those who have been engaged in even highly 'parasitic' forms of cuckooing (Spicer et al., 2019) as contemptable or worthy of comeuppance would appear somewhat detached from reality.

7.3.1 The practical barriers of pursuing a Modern Slavery conviction

Beyond its theoretical inconsistency, there are also reasons why, on a practical level, charging offenders under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 was considered problematic by officers. In addition to the aforementioned scepticism expressed regarding the aims described to them of charging and prosecution of offenders under the Act, throughout my fieldwork I observed a more general reluctance to pursue this strategy. A number of challenges were discussed which I recorded in my field notes. One of these was the need for officers to find an 'obvious' victim who would be willing to give evidence, something considered unlikely to occur. Moreover, it was suggested that even with the possibility that a victim was prepared to give evidence, advancing such a case that posed a good chance of being successful would be costly and complex. Defendants were considered far more likely to plead not guilty to a Modern Slavery offence leading to an expensive and time consuming trial. Relatedly, several officers noted that the Crown Prosecution Service did not like to pursue such

routes if there were much simpler and traditional routes to conviction, such as 'possession with intent to supply'. Some of the detectives involved in a recent crackdown operation reiterated this point, recalling how the dealers who they subsequently charged with supply offences immediately pleaded guilty, preventing the cases having to go to trial. Had they been charged under the Modern Slavery Act, scepticism was raised about whether a swift and effective conviction would have been the outcome.

These manifold concerns show not only some of the key reasons why pursuing Modern Slavery prosecutions appeared so unattractive, but also how these issues interplay and compound one another. The difficulty of identifying an 'obvious' victim highlights the complexities of the County Lines issue and how notions of exploitation and vulnerability are difficult to interpret and implement in practice (Coliandris, 2015). Expecting anyone to give evidence against an exploitative drug dealer and their wider network is always likely to be difficult. If that victim has had negative experiences with the police and the criminal justice system, perhaps relating to their drug use or previous convictions, this would seem particularly challenging. Because those affected may not typify the 'ideal victim' status (Christie, 1986), be so-called 'victim/perpetrators' (Coliandris, 2015), or even considered 'police property' (Waddington, 1999b), this may also make officers less willing to view them as suitable. These observations suggest that officers did not generally believe it appropriate to consider County Lines offenders as committing acts of Modern Slavery, or that there was a failure from those promoting this tactic to adequately explain why this might be appropriate and worthwhile in some cases.

In line with the general, often somewhat symbolic, aims of officers to arrest and 'lock up' as many offenders for as long as possible, there also seemed little in the way of incentive for them to pursue Modern Slavery convictions. In addition to being difficult to achieve, there was substantial scepticism that these convictions would lead to significantly longer prison sentences than traditional supply offences.

> *"The evidence isn't there, people aren't being convicted of the offence. And those that are, in slightly different circumstances, we're just not seeing long prison sentences. So, we can waste a whole load of time and effort and go*

through not-guilty trials, and putting victims and witnesses through pretty traumatic experiences, without achieving our real goal which is to lock them up and prevent them from doing those types of activities. Whereas if we go down a more traditional route of possession with intent to supply, they can be getting two or three years, or they can get six to eight years depending on what we've got on them." – [Detective]

As a specific tactic, it therefore seemingly failed to tap into the 'mission' element of cop culture (Reiner, 2010), something which might have served as a catalyst for officers to attempt to navigate some of the challenges of using it. The added pressures from the CPS clearly added further reticence, something reinforced at a meeting where a detective from another force recounted how they had pursued such convictions but had been refused by them. While the several successful cases nationally would suggest that it is possible for this legislation to be used (see Stone, 2018) arguably the most notable feature of these are their infrequency. As a specific tactic in response to the County Lines issue, pursuing Modern Slavery convictions would therefore not appear to be one that can be regularly used by forces, if at all, fundamentally undermining its capacity to adequately respond to and reduce externalities. Similar to the DDTRO power, it can, however, be considered as somewhat symbolic. As illustrated by the media coverage of the select few successful cases that occurred after fieldwork (e.g. Guardian, 2018), generating convictions under the Modern Slavery Act for County Lines offences illustrates how seriously a police force are taking this new issue, particularly in showing commitment towards responding to the vulnerability, exploitation and 'gang talk' so prevalent in County Lines discourse. Simultaneously, those convicted also appear to take on a prized status, previously only achievable via the capture of a 'Mr Big' deemed high up the drug supply chain (Dorn et al., 1992).

7.4 Crackdown operations: More of the same?

While these new and bespoke responses to County Lines sporadically emerged and were negotiated by officers, the more familiar staple of the crackdown operation remained a popular recourse in the local context. This popularity was indicated by

their frequency, with one finishing shortly before the start of the fieldwork period and another shortly after, but also how they were viewed among officers. These were, it was suggested, the type of police work many officers thrived on and enjoyed.

> *"They're bloody hard work, mate. I mean you end up working silly hours and having your missus pissed off, but we all love it"*. – [Detective]

Because of some practicalities, as well as sensitivities regarding covert surveillance and test purchasing, I was unable to follow or participate in these as closely as some of the other responses. I was, however, able to glean significant insight into their procedures and outcomes. As a general process, the operations involved a prolonged period of intelligence gathering that culminated in 'strike days' usually involving mass arrests. To maintain privacy and prevent any leaks that might undermine their success, the date of these were kept secret, often taking other staff and agencies by surprise. As with similar crackdown operations undertaken and publicised by other forces over the same time period, they generated significant media attention, something senior officers actively promoted and combined with soundbite messages typically along the lines of *"we will not tolerate this activity in our towns"*. The strike days and the subsequent convictions were widely promoted by police press releases, as well as being covered by local newspapers and other media outlets. In a 'hall of mirrors' (Ferrell et al., 2015), these materials were then subsequently promoted by the force's social media platforms, presented to local councillors and at events I attended involving other agencies.

When applying for resources to undertake them, official objectives stipulated by the Senior Investigating Officers included 'removing open drug dealing', 'reducing gang violence' and 'improving community confidence'. The first two were cited as specific products of County Lines in their local area and conforms to the observation of high visibility drug market activity organically rising to become police priorities (Aitken et al., 2002). As admitted by one detective, the latter, however, was suggested as being "*something that you always have to put on*" and therefore seemed not quite as important. More informally, among officers these operations were often referred to as 'proper' police work and the appropriate response to County Lines. They were viewed as a way of bringing about 'order' (Harcourt, 2002) to specific local

neighbourhoods heavily affected by the burgeoning presence of 'out of town' dealers. As they specifically targeted crack and heroin markets they also appeared to tap into the various reasons why intensified policing against these drugs in particular have historically been popular (see Collison, 1995), with the general status of these drugs, the profile of those who use them and their links with crime all common justifications provided. However, while the emphasis was firmly on making arrests and securing convictions, they were not entirely detached from notions of responding to vulnerability. This was still generally referred to as being a core aim of the operations, with it taken as something of an axiom that the targeting of these County Lines 'villains' would go in some way to address these issues.

Upon the completion of these operations, many arrests were made. An often-relayed police 'victory story' (see Shearing and Ericson, 1991) from one was how a newly built station's cell capacity was reached for the first time. However, of striking similarity to Coomber et al.'s (2017) analysis, when analysing them more closely the predominant outcome was the widespread criminalisation of local populations. The vast majority of those who became the target of this intense policing were not the dangerous outsiders identified as causing so much harm, exploiting vulnerable local populations, being a threat to local communities and the very reason why the crackdowns were undertaken. Instead, the demographics of those convicted suggested vast swathes of local heroin and crack users had been swept up. This was confirmed by, among others, a manager of a local drug service who spoke of its effect on his client base:

> *"I mean, if you look at a recent operation that took place locally, I think around two thirds that were arrested and charged were service users of ours. I would assume they're at the very much lower end of the scale in terms of their involvement with the gangs and those networks."* – [Drug Service Manager]

While such arrestees were often convicted of offences beyond possession and presented as being involved in County Lines in some way, the vast majority evidently did not play any serious role in these supply operations. Not only were they local to the area, but they were also almost exclusively users of heroin and/or crack, well known to a range of local services, predominantly middle aged, and often with a long

155

history of low-level offending. Far from being highly organised, ruthless and commercial 'out of town' dealers, they instead appeared to be at best user-dealers at the very bottom rungs of the drug market (Coomber and Moyle, 2018), or those who had become embroiled in County Lines activities, such as housing 'out of town' dealers in 'quasi cuckooing' scenarios that did not embody classic perceptions of exploitation and vulnerability (Spicer et al., 2019).

Ultimately, officers did recognise that most of those arrested were not commercial 'out of town' dealers, but by evaluating success by quantity of arrests made and neglecting other outcomes, this bolstered a sense of solidarity and success (Bacon, 2016a), and belief that this could significantly undermine local drug markets. At the very least, it was perceived as demonstrating that they were responding to County Lines and associated issues. However, in practice, there seemed to be minimal, if any, noticeable impact on levels of local heroin and crack supply. While the stated objectives of these operations seemed to suggest a more nuanced approach, targeted at the issues associated with County Lines supply, by believing this could be achieved via what was ultimately a supply orientated response, the operations seemingly failed to address any of the externalities and perhaps even exacerbated them. For example, in one town where a crackdown was undertaken, the consensus just a few months later among intelligence and local officers was that the market was now completely serviced by 'out of town' dealers. It could be suspected, therefore, that having arrested so many locals over such a short period, this served to propel the already evolving local market into a fully 'import' market completely controlled and serviced by those engaged in outreach supply methodologies (Coomber et al., 2017). Creating this vacuum appeared to have presented a gap for new dealers to fill, as well an opportunity for those already operating to strengthen their grip. This was illustrated by the emergence of new lines shortly after these crackdowns took place and the fact that many of the familiar out of town dealer names and the branded lines they were running continued to come through on intelligence reports.

7.4.1 Crackdown operations as 'weak' signals of control

As suggested, the operations therefore seemingly played an important symbolic function, internally among officers and teams, and externally in achieving recognition

from the public and external stakeholders. The mass arrests were well publicised and one of the operational teams involved received an award for their success. Typically with regard to media relations, the police are judged to "keep their cards close to their chest" Skogan (2004, p. 260), only sharing select, partial and mediated insights into their work. These particular operations, however, were a popular option to lay on display. They were considered a highly effective way of demonstrating the local police's commitment and success in tackling the County Lines problem and evidence that they recognised the associated issues.

It was also perceived that crackdowns communicated the message to 'out of town' dealers themselves that the locality was alert to and intolerant of the 'out of place matter' (Douglas, 1966) that they represented. This appeared to quench a deeper anxiety consistently expressed, and perhaps perpetuated by some of the claims made in NCA reports (2016; 2017), that their force area, and by association they as local police teams, were a 'soft target', 'push overs' and generally not taken seriously by these 'out of town' dealers:

> *"I think a lot of them think that they can come down here and do what they want and run around and not have the same risk that they do from the Met or wherever."* – [Uniformed Officer]

Feeding into wider anxieties of the current state of policing in an era of austerity, this was something also compounded by the cuts to police funding, an almost daily topic of anger:

> *"I've been in this job over twenty years and I've never known policing like it"* – [Detective]

In this sense, the crackdown operations and other highly visible policing activities served to reassure officers of their ability to effectively carry out their local role in relation to drug markets as well as their wider societal function. Notably, however, interviews with those working outside of the police organisation suggested that these communicative displays of strength and victory had not been bought into by others in the way officers might have hoped. This discrepancy between the crackdowns, on the one hand being proclaimed as a successful response to new,

'dangerous' outsiders, and on the other, ultimately targeting local users, was recognised by many of those working for local partner organisations. Following one of the crackdown operations that resulted in multiple arrests, significant surprise was expressed about its outcome. When discussing it, one local authority worker reflected:

"I had two initial thoughts. The first was 'oh I know that name, I know that name' (laughs). I suppose the other was that I was quite surprised about the amount of local people on there. Because County Lines is, most of them are people that don't come from XXXX (local county), they obviously recruit local people as well, so that was my other surprise really, how many local people were actually on the list. I thought there would have been a lot more out of County individuals." – [Community Safety Manager]

Similarly, another noted:

"The fifty arrests and stuff, when you look through those, in reality there's probably, what, about five or six of them that are actually the County Lines. The rest of them are local scrotes. Half of them you read it and they're the who's who of who's been causing us issues for years, on all fronts, drinking in public that kind of stuff, just the low-level annoyance in our neighbourhoods. So it's great that we're kind of dealing with them, I guess, but I still feel that - I think it's partly because of the complications of how it works and stuff - I never feel there's been enough…. I would like to see a lot more of the London, Somalis, you know the gangs that have been coming down here. I would like to see a lot more of them in prison than just our local low level scrotes. And that maybe sounds a bit negative – and I think there's been some great work been done – but I'm not sure … I would have liked to have seen more of the London gang members actually caught and taken to task. But I think the problem is that they're not stupid, are they? That's why they use all of these runners actually … they won't have the drugs on them. It's the locals and stuff that do the donkey work for them and take on all the risk. So, yeah, I would like to see some higher level stuff, because it still feels a lot like you can arrest

hundreds of these low-level people, but they'll just wait a while, they'll come back and use other people and it becomes just a cycle. So, unless you're taking out the guys that are sat back from London where the headquarters are from, unless you take them out, in reality, you're just taking out that low tier and it's going to a be a continuing cycle." – [Community Safety Officer]

Rather than viewing these intensive policing operations as evidence of successful responses to County Lines, representatives of partner agencies therefore tended to express pessimism or disappointment, not convinced that the use of high-profile crackdown operations were having a positive impact or that they would likely do so in the future. Some expressed confusion over why individuals who had been subjects of safeguarding discussions in partnership meetings were being arrested, instead of the 'out of town' dealers who were considered the threat. This appeared to compound a sense that policing activity was unlikely to have any effective impact on the issues emanating out of County Lines that they were facing. The manager of the local drug service, for example, was concerned by escalating violence and exploitative cuckooing of his service users:

"We seem to be having lots of people that are having injuries where they're claiming to have fallen downstairs and things like that. You know, obviously drug users are gunna be impaired to a degree, so it does make accidents more likely, but certain things like that seem to be increasing in frequency … We have had service users telling us about people that they've willingly let in to their property but then, all of a sudden, they see machetes and other weapons." – [Drug Service Manager]

The mass arrests of locals and many of his service users was not, however, considered reassuring that effective action was being taken or that these issues were going to be reduced. For others, this reinforced concerns that, if this was the best the police could achieve - something implied by the operation's continued positive coverage and commendation - there was little they or others could do in response to County Lines. Instead, this was now a problem that was considered 'here to stay'.

This is how I feel, it's a personal opinion, is that you feel like they're never going to go away now. So, we've got to now sort of accept it and deal with it. You know it's become part of our organisational practice, how to deal with Organised Crime Gangs, which two or three years ago we'd never even thought of. So, it's quite a new thing. So, you just feel like you're just going to keep moving them. I mean, there's so many properties and you keep just going round and round and round (…) But you do, you just feel like it's part of your routine, you're just waiting for the next one really. – [Neighbourhood Manager for Housing Provider]

These pessimistic responses to the crackdowns, which did not appear to be voiced directly to the police themselves, provide further insight into some of the potential negative unintended consequences of crackdown operations. Intended to be highly visible 'signals of control' (Innes, 2014), to this audience they appeared to have the opposite communicative effect the police sought. As a binary policing 'spectacle' (Edelman, 1988), they could therefore be considered rather lopsided. The 'threat' from dangerous 'out of town' dealers, which partner agencies were aware of through the heightened publicity surrounding the issue, their own experiences with clients and the awareness raising efforts by the police, had not been met with appropriately orientated police actions and outcomes to provide a suitable level of 'reassurance'. They provided an unsatisfactory 'illusion of order' (Harcourt, 2002). Building on the critiques of drug policing outlined in chapter four, in addition to being perceived as superficial or counterproductive, these observations suggest the potential damage that the adoption of high-profile, but unfocused operations can engender from those who are aware of their true outcomes. Significantly, therefore, and resonant with the findings of Foster (2000), not only are drug policing operations that seek to demonstrate success through numbers of arrests and convictions ill-suited to tackling the complex itinerant and exploitative nature of County Lines drug markets, but their failure to be effective is seemingly recognised by those most in need of receiving positive and reassuring 'signals of control' (Innes, 2014). In turn, this risks fostering cynicism, negativity and a loss of faith in efforts to respond to local problems.

7.5 Local 'days of action'

In comparison to the high-profile crackdown operations, at the more 'low-key' end of the drug policing scale, the increasing prominence and profile of County Lines led to other traditional policing activity in the form of frequent localised 'days of action'. These were specifically devised at trying to respond to the presence of County Lines in local towns and generally planned a week or so in advance. A popular option for officers who often stated how nice it was to *"get out from behind the desk"*, they occurred almost weekly in some towns, especially in the summer months. They primarily took two main forms, either intelligence-initiated or resource initiated. For the former, heightened levels of 'good' intelligence prompted the action, usually relating to a tip-off regarding where County Lines dealers were staying or where dealing was reported to be taking place. Occasionally, however, they arose from a specific incident. One was prompted by a PCSO purportedly being told to *"go away"* by a dealer in a park to *"let them deal"*. Although it was ultimately unclear if this was a County Lines dealer, this provoked outrage in the local police station and was perceived by the Sergeant as them *"taking the piss"*. Another was swiftly organised after an officer was driven at by a dealer after he fled a cuckooed address. In comparison, days initiated by resources arose when there were enough local officers available to undertake a meaningful day of activity, if it was feasible to draft in officers from other areas, or if the Regional Organised Crime Unit was the instigator and had provided some manpower of their own.

Always starting very early in the morning, these days began with a briefing, typically in the form of a PowerPoint presentation from the Sergeant designated with co-ordinating the day. Levels of detail and the quality of these briefings varied between stations, officers and whether the days were intelligence or resource led. Generally, however, a range of properties known to have been cuckooed in the past or suspected as currently being used by 'out of town' dealers were allotted to different teams to visit. Similarly, areas suggested as being where dealing took place were also identified, predominantly in the form of parks or churchyards. Much of the emphasis of these days were placed around safeguarding populations deemed as vulnerable to cuckooing via conducting welfare checks. However, by the time we had been divided

into teams, left the station, and jumped into the various cars with 'packs' containing the mugshots of various County Lines dealers known to frequent the town, what was predominantly on many of the officer's minds was to "*catch the villains*".

7.5.1 Smoke gets in your eyes?

As part of these days there were indeed the odd occasion where a County Lines dealer would be spotted. Sometimes they would be found in the addresses we visited and one afternoon, a plain clothes officer and I literally walked into a dealer from London as we left the home of a local heroin user. These were, however, rare. After attending many, what became particularly notable was how often attention would quickly become displaced onto generic illicit drug activity. Rather than targeting and finding 'out of town' dealers, visible local users, sometimes even of 'softer' drugs, frequently became the focus of attention. Although by no means exclusively, this was particularly the case with days more 'resource' rather than 'intelligence' initiated. The following field notes, recorded one sunny summer morning, provide a good example:

> *After leaving a previously cuckooed address having conducted a welfare check, intelligence had come through from an informant that two runners had recently left a nearby flat and were near the town centre. We set about going for a drive trying to find them. A few minutes passed when a crackling came through on the radio. "We've just arrested someone for drugs in the park, he's getting a bit agro!" came the voice of an officer. "I'm not getting agro!" came a distant other voice in reply. "Sounds like they need back up" said the officer driving the car. He flicked on the flashing lights, the wheels skidded and we went zooming over to the other side of town. As the three of us got to the park we were met by another police car containing the other team of three officers. We ran down the path where five PCSOs, two police officers and two police horses stood. Two men were in handcuffs and being spoke to. The arresting officer came forward and explained how when they approached them the man had flicked what she believed to be a joint into the bushes. "What, so you're arresting me for a little lollipop joint?!" said one of the men in handcuffs in frustration. "Drugs are drugs" replied one of the PCSOs. We all*

162

stood around for over half an hour. Two PCSOs scrabbled around in the bushes trying to find the discarded joint, but had no luck. The arresting officer expressed disappointment that she had not had her body worn camera on to record the moment. Initially she was adamant that further action needed to be taken: "He needs to be taken to the station", she implored. However, they were both searched and nothing was found on them. One was released, while the other was given a cannabis warning.

Finally, we and the other team went back to the car with the aim of going back in search of the County Lines dealers. Some comments were made about the last half hour not being the best use of police time and what the numerous local residents peering over the park wall must have thought was going on given the vast police presence. They also feared that the opportunity to act on the live intelligence and find the County Lines dealers before they disappeared into a different flat might be missed. We started to make our way back into town but within minutes another call came through the radio that more drug arrests had been made. We turned around back to the park and pulled up to see more of the PCSOs as well as three other police officers with two teenagers, their bikes leant up against the wall. They were being searched and given the amount of officers and the call for back up, I initially assumed them to be County Lines runners, perhaps even the ones we were looking for. Further information on them came back to say that they were 16, but that they were both local to the area. Out of the pockets of one came a cannabis grinder, but no burner phone or large amounts of cash. For the other, a small amount of cannabis was found. It was discovered that they were students from the local college who had come to the park to smoke on a free period.
[Field notes]

This specific extract speaks particularly to a divergence of attention on cannabis users, but similar activity was also prominent among users of heroin and crack. On another day of action, having tracked and arrested the occupants of a car known to be used by a prominent County Lines group operating in the local area early in the morning, supply in the town appeared to have been significantly disrupted. Local

users became notably more visible than usual, something speculated as being due to them trying to score. This, combined with a lack of dealers to target, led to a day comprised of, as one officer put it "*looking for shit*", where this population was consistently followed, searched and generally bothered.

Such examples illustrate the tendency for these days of supposedly targeted policing on the streets to slip into generic drug policing activities, unduly focusing attention and resources on what would widely be regarded as very low level offences and certainly not County Lines related. While the specific nature of the days of action were intended for targeting 'out of town' dealers, frequently this translated into officers going out and *"turning over"* as many local people for drug possession offences as possible. As discussed in chapter four, Bear (2016) identified the propensity for officers to target low level drug possession offences as a way of achieving tangible outcomes from their day's work. A similar process appeared to be observed here. In the face of 'officer boredom' (see Phillips, 2016), and having been riled up by a motivational briefing earlier that morning, such activity was a superficially welcome achievement, providing means of achieving 'symbolic objectives' (Barbalet, 1999) on what were otherwise often frustrating, uneventful days.

7.5.2 Local drug dealing 'hotspots'

Appearing to perpetuate this unfocused gaze on locals, was the practice of targeting drug dealing "hotspots" as part of these local days of action. Rather than recognising the more nuanced 'speakeasy' (Buerger, 1992) operations associated with County Lines as identified in the previous chapter, the local drug market was often conceptualised by officers in relation to physical drug dealing transactions taking place in well-defined geographical areas, reminiscent of a classically 'open' market (May and Hough, 2004). Having been briefed on these areas at the start of the day, many hours were spent scoping out various parks, churchyards or alleyways with the belief that, sooner or later, illicit activity would occur. Being in plain clothes and considered a good tool not to raise suspicion, I often accompanied other plain clothes officers on walks around these areas trying to spot who might be dealing. Initially this was quite exciting, with the hope of being able to inconspicuously spot a County Lines

dealer red-handed. However, it soon became clear across the multiple towns where I engaged in this activity, that these conceptualisations of the drug market were not borne out of reality.

In practice, as reaffirmed upon analysing the content of intelligence logs, County Lines runners did not have a set physical territory or 'corner' where they dealt to local customers. Rather, most of these identified "hotspots" appeared to be places where a local beat officer had received complaints about more general low-level antisocial behaviour or youth congregation, something indicated by how frequently these were playing fields and skate parks. Spending so much time at these areas not only appeared to be a poor use of resources, but also exacerbated boredom among officers and a disproportionate suspicion of anyone who was in the area. The following field notes, included only partially because of their humorous content, illustrate this.

> *By lunchtime we had visited all the suspected cuckooed addresses on our list. It was suggested that we head over to a playing field which had been identified as being a dealing "hotspot". Two of the plain clothes detectives walked around one way while I and another walked around the other. Little seemed to be going on, with young parents being the main inhabitants. After about half an hour, conversation dried up and we were stood aimlessly in the middle of the field. Suddenly breaking the silence, the detective whispered to me "Ey up, this guy looks a bit shifty, he keeps giving us the eyes. Reckon I should go and have a word?". I turned around, hoping to see the face of one of the County Lines dealers pinned on the wall of the station I had been looking at earlier. Instead, I was greeted by the sight of one my academic supervisors walking his dog. He had spotted me, but because of his knowledge of what I was doing was wary of coming over. Despite the temptation to alleviate the tedium of the afternoon and encourage a search to take place, I quickly informed the officer that I knew who the shifty playing field inhabitant was, hence why he was 'giving us the eyes'.* [Field notes]

This was by no means the only time such incidents occurred. Another included officers being suspicious that a lady pushing a buggy in the park was not actually

taking her new-born for a walk but was using it as a prop for dealing. After inconspicuously following her for several minutes, a swift walk past to peek inside confirmed that there was indeed a human occupant of the pram.

Albeit somewhat based on intelligence and reminiscent of to the type of approaches promoted by those who extoll the virtues of 'hot spot' drug market approaches (Rengert et al., 2005), such episodes illustrate how a conceptualisation of the local drug market conforming more to stereotypical depictions of strict geographical boundaries, rather than how and where transactions actually take place, results in ineffective, symbolic policing. Not only were they time inefficient, but because of the frustration and the suspicion that arose from anyone frequenting these areas, if drug arrests were made it was almost always for more generic low-level activities, rather than who they set out to target and who was ultimately causing the most harm. This arguably highlights the need for a more nuanced, 'socialised' understanding of drug market activity to be deployed in order for localised responses to be effective (Dwyer and Moore, 2010).

7.5.3 Welfare checks: A double edged sword?

As major components, a final notable aspect of these 'days of action' concerned the nature and outcomes of the welfare checks of 'vulnerable' local residents. Focused on addresses known to have been previously cuckooed or suspected of currently having County Lines dealers staying, on several occasions as part of these some young runners were actually found in the homes. On one of my earliest outings I endured a volley of abuse in the back of a police van from two teenagers from a faraway city, who went into great detail about the sexual activities they planned to do with the wife and daughter they assumed I had. On another occasion I ended up helping an officer trying to coax two 'out of town' dealers off an unstable roof they had jumped on to from the window of a neighbouring flat we had just visited. But these incidents were rare, not least because, if dealers were present, doors would seldom be opened to officers by the occupants. Despite a couple of 'inventive' techniques occasionally being used, without a warrant, officers could not get in. Typically, therefore, these visits comprised of interactions between officers and local residents. From the vast number I observed these did appear beneficial in some

cases. However, they could also be something of a double-edged sword. While premised on the basis of safeguarding, in some cases their outcomes appeared to somewhat paradoxically compound the exclusion and vulnerability of local populations.

One of the main elements of these welfare checks involved providing the occupant with a 'cuckooing letter'. The content of these included a stark warning that:

> "Intelligence links you and your address to the supply of drugs. This intelligence indicates links to organized crime groups from outside of this region. I must warn you that if your address is found to being used to facilitate this supply you could be prosecuted under section 8 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971."

However, amid the general emphasis of the risk of prosecution and loss of tenancy, one sentence of these letters did strike a more empathetic tone stating that:

> "If you are being asked or threatened to allow your premises to be used by these groups please ask for help."

The officers attempted to provide these to all of those they visited. They also made a point of recording the receipt of this letter on their body worn cameras. In some cases, these letters appeared to have significant value. Several formerly cuckooed residents recounted how they had been able to show 'out of town' dealers these letters when they had subsequently attempted to re-establish a base in a 'quasi cuckooing' type scenario (Spicer et al., 2019). They were used as evidence that the police were watching their home and that it was not a good idea for them to stay there. Faced with a lack of 'street capital' (Sandberg, 2008) these letters therefore provided some with the ability to prevent being cuckooed and to do so in a way that was relatively non – confrontational towards exploitative and intimidating County Lines dealers.

In other cases, however, the use of these letters appeared to be less about the welfare of the local residents and more as a tool to facilitate disciplinary action and social control. For some residents who regularly had County Lines dealers staying in

their flats in the type of cyclical process discussed in Spicer et al. (2019) and did not engage with the police or other agencies in the way they wanted them to, the fact that they had previously received a cuckooing letter was used as evidence to enact a closure order on their property. The content of the letter was used to demonstrate that the occupant had been offered help but had failed to take it up, and that closing their home and evicting them was the only option. As one officer who developed something of a reputation for enacting closure orders in her town described her approach:

> *"A lot of the time I tend to go down the housing route. Because I think the fear of them losing their property means so much more than anything we can do. So yeah, like I said, I try to go down that route really of, if you continue to have these people in your home then I'll do what I can to get your house taken off you."* – [Police Officer]

In addition to cuckooing letters, as part of these visits, the nature of the interactions between officers and these local residents was also of note. In particular, the extent to which many of these locals, who were almost universally heroin and/or crack users, were willing to share information about the state of local market and who was operating within it was something that took me by surprise. Some, who officers described as being 'old school', would take an adversarial approach, often begrudgingly letting officers into their flat and not providing any information than absolutely necessary. But many others often needed little encouragement to share detailed information, often empathising with the threatening portrayal of County Lines dealers that officers provided. These interactions were especially prevalent among some officers who had built up a clear rapport with certain locals. Often couching questions in a friendly, almost humorously ironic way, such as *"I don't want to stop you from scoring later today but could you tell us about who's currently operating in the area?",* many of those we visited provided extensive detail including which lines were currently operating, where dealers were staying and what the general state of the local market was. In turn, officers also frequently sought to help them with issues such as obtaining benefits and access to drug services.

However, similar to the use of cuckoo letters, the capacity for these visits and the interactions between officers and occupants to result in negative outcomes for locals was never far away. One particular case involving a woman who intelligence suggested had County Lines dealers staying in her home neatly illustrates this. As an officer recounted to me the morning before I accompanied him on a welfare check of her address, two other officers had visited her several weeks prior. Having let them in, while one spoke to her downstairs, the other officer looked around to see if any dealers were present. None were found, but a small amount of heroin was discovered in her bedroom and the decision was made to arrest her. When we subsequently attended her house, she opened the door only slightly ajar while the officer tried to negotiate his way inside. A camp bed was visible in the room behind her, immediately raising concerns, but despite his best efforts the lady refused, citing the experience she had previously had. A week later, with further intelligence of County Lines dealers continuing to use her home received, we attended her home again. This time, apart from a slight flicker of the curtains, there was no response to the officer's persistent knocks.

Such a case illustrates the challenge of conducting successful welfare checks on this population, rather than just symbolically addressing concerns of vulnerability and exploitation. Despite it seemingly being possible for officers to engage positively and effectively with this population, potentially reducing drug market harms in the process, because of the structurally engrained adversarial relationship between the two, there is something of an inevitability that negative outcomes may occur. Whether it be arrest for drug possession offences or the loss of their home, what becomes further visible is how local policing responses to the issue of 'the outsider threat' of County Lines can often lead to further exclusion and criminalisation of local populations. This one specific case therefore speaks to a much wider trend illustrated by the other responses that, in the face of this outsider drug market threat, the common ultimate outcome was the greater confrontational interactions between local users and officers.

7.6 Conclusion

Reporting on ethnographic fieldwork, this chapter has detailed the varied policing responses to County Lines that occurred at a local level and were enacted across multiple 'import' towns. Two main types came to the fore in response to the intensification of this drug supply model, the evolving and increasingly prevalent import markets in their towns, and the associated impact on local communities. New, more bespoke tactics, sought to provide officers with additional tools to respond to this drug market development or encourage them to pursue novel alternative convictions. However, among officers on the ground, these appeared widely unpopular. Significant practical issues combined with scepticism of their suggested outcomes meant that they remained unlikely to be used. What did remain popular, however, were the more locally driven, traditional responses applied or adapted to the evolution of their local drug markets. Familiar crackdown operations were a popular recourse and more localised 'days of action' were the most obvious manifestation of this and were frequently undertaken. Yet, in addition to some outcomes familiar within the drug policing literature, particularly notable about these were their primary gaze and often negative impact on local populations.

Beyond concerns of effectiveness or how these can be understood through more nuanced aims relating to harm reduction principles (Bacon, 2016a), the findings importantly highlight the often central role of symbolism in understanding these responses, and how, why, or if they were used. The fact that many responses had highly 'symbolic' aspirations is perhaps unsurprising given the prominent nature of County Lines nationally and the associated drive to respond to it locally. Highly visible or widely promoted policing activity in the form of crackdowns, or potential outcomes such as Modern Slavery convictions, present as a way of constructing this spectacle, sending out a message that the police were responding to the issue successfully. However, as noted by representatives of partner agencies this did not always have the desired effect. Instead, the pessimism these failed 'signals of control' (Innes, 2014) engendered could be considered a further unintended consequence of unfocused drug policing. Importantly, much of the motivations behind undertaking these varied responses and how they played out in practice can also be understood

by the meanings and symbolism attached to them internally within the police organisation. Adding further insight into how and why specific drug policing responses are used with regard to notions of symbolism, these findings therefore build upon and extend the original observations made by Coomber et al. (2017).

8.0 Drug Market priorities: The application of harm reduction principles in the context of County Lines policing

8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter suggested that initial tactics and operational responses to County Lines were ineffective, symbolic and often fell back to habitual and arguably flawed methods of drug market policing. However, as perhaps familiar as some of those findings were, throughout the fieldwork there was another distinct 'strand' to the policing response I observed. Throughout, but especially towards the latter part of the fieldwork period, this intensified around what could be broadly understood as the application of harm reduction principles (Bacon, 2016a). By way of further analysing local responses to County Lines, but also in an attempt to theoretically develop this perspective and apply it within a contemporary context, this final empirical chapter presents ethnographic findings and analysis that specifically relate to this.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. In the first it focuses on occasions when senior dealers running County Lines in the local area were arrested. It discusses the case of a seemingly 'ideal' line, the wider variance visible across different 'out of town' dealing groups and the implications this raises to applying harm reduction principles to this context. The second section of the chapter focuses on a model of prioritisation that officers sought to apply to the policing of County Lines. In contrast to some of the limitations of applying the philosophy of harm reduction in its purist form, such a strategy is suggested as posing as a pragmatic way of achieving genuine,

albeit modest, progression in how drug policing is undertaken. In the final section, the chapter discusses some of the challenges associated with this notion of prioritisation. In particular, it would appear that an objective, systematic strategy may be difficult to achieve in practice.

8.2 Netting the 'elders': Variance and the case of the 'ideal' line

While the previous chapter documented how, during the fieldwork period, local populations were the most affected by the various initial policing responses to County Lines, as part of operations and other policing activity, the occasional senior out of town dealer was also arrested. Often both internally and externally presented as akin to 'king pins' (Pearson and Hobbs, 2003) or 'big kahunas' (Gundur, 2019) these prized arrests were reassuring evidence for some officers that those higher up the supply chain were within reach. Those working in intelligence often appeared particularly enthused upon their capture. This was perhaps explained by how familiar they had become with the names of these 'senior nominals' and having often undertaken the laborious task of combing through thousands of their phone records to generate evidence. Yet, corresponding with the common observations of drug policing outcomes outlined in chapter four, while these arrests served as welcome encouragement that success could be achieved, this was ultimately short-lived when these dealers and their respective lines were swiftly replaced. One line, which was tracked after several arrests, was only disrupted for four hours when two replacement runners almost immediately picked up where the others had left off. On occasion it also transpired that some of those arrested were not quite as senior as first thought. One morning, officers were puzzled when a local heroin user, who we had visited as part of a welfare check, showed them that a line they believed to have recently been 'taken out' was still advertising itself to local customers several weeks later.

However, beyond these perhaps somewhat predictable outcomes, out of these arrests some other notable issues emerged. One particularly intriguing case involved the arrest of a County Lines 'elder' (Coomber and Moyle, 2018), understood to be at the head of the supply operation. It was thought that his line had been well

established for over a year in a local town. Extensive intelligence gathering, including the use of test purchases, found him to be running a highly organised and profitable operation, with a core group of runners servicing high numbers of local customers. He was traced back to his urban origin, charged and received a lengthy prison sentence. As a demonstrable outcome of an operation instigated in response to the problem of County Lines in the force area, it was judged a significant success. Intriguingly, however, when discussing the case in detail with the officers involved it transpired that, beyond engaging in supply, this dealer and the line he managed was actually engaged in minimal levels of the harmful behaviour typically associated with this supply methodology:

> *"If we look at what XXXX (name of dealer) did, who was one of the guys we took out on XXXX (name of operation), he was probably one of the most palatable of our dealers, because he actually understood the impact on the community. And we know that because we found his notebooks. And in them, it was almost like a career review, like one-to-ones with dealers operating in (local town) XXXX. And it was things like 'Tidy up the backyard, be nicer to customers'. Oh, another one was 'Improve your communication skills' (laughs). But he was setting parameters on what their behaviour should be like and how they should look after the locations they were in. And he was renting properties. So, he was looking to rent properties, not dealing from them, and keeping the property looking ok so it wouldn't come to the attention of the police. And then take the dealing away from the property. So, the property might store drugs, store cash, and it might have people who were dealing drugs sleeping there. But the activity on that particular street wouldn't appear to the neighbours to be (different to) any other house.'* – [Senior Detective]

While operating an identifiable County Lines methodology, by abstaining from the externalities classically associated with these types of operations, this dealer therefore arguably represented the almost 'ideal' out of town dealer through a harm reduction perspective. Although involved in significant levels of heroin and crack supply, by operating out of rented properties, not engaging in cuckooing and being

mindful not to draw local residents' attention to their activities, his network's effect on vulnerable local populations and the wider community would appear to have been minimal. This was reinforced given that the line was not particularly associated with the use of violence. The runners were also complicit 'out of town' adults, so there did not appear to be the type of exploitation of young people or vulnerable locals in the manner commonly associated with County Lines (Moyle, forthcoming; Robinson et al., 2018).

This case therefore indicates that it is not inevitable that dealers employing this supply outreach methodology will be engaged in overly harmful dealing practices. Albeit with significant levels of organisation, it is seemingly possible to operate without perpetuating the types of deleterious drug market externalities traditionally associated with County Lines. Indeed, even with the highest levels of enthusiasm for pursuing such convictions, there was nothing that officers could have identified in relation to the Modern Slavery Act (2015). While the evidence provided in previous chapters and in relation to County Lines more broadly would generally suggest that Reuter and MacCoun's (1992) prediction that 'import' markets are disposed to be more violent and generally problematic than 'local' markets to be true, this case therefore demonstrates that this is not strictly a given. In fact, by going to such organisational lengths to reduce attention and manage the conduct of those operating at the street level, this particular supply operation may well have been less problematic than some local dealers.

Having been sensitised to this issue of variance between different lines I sought to explore it further during the fieldwork. A 'live' spreadsheet that analysts used to collate all of the intelligence reports for each known line over a two-year period proved invaluable for being able to look for differences between the numbers of groups that fell under the umbrella of 'County Lines'. Upon analysing its content, significant variance became apparent. For example, while most physically dealt away from where they were staying, some dealt from local premises, seemingly often resulting in heightened complaints from other residents. With regard to cuckooing practices, some groups routinely engaged in highly exploitative 'parasitic' forms of cuckooing (Spicer et al., 2019), others, seemingly having built up a vast network of

potential addresses, used a number of different flats across a town, while other lines used just a select few premises, often in more mutualistic 'rental' (Coomber, 2015) scenarios.

The local presence of many groups also varied. In one town, a particularly prominent line was seemingly close to monopolising the market and had a full-time presence. As subsequently confirmed by an officer:

> *"I think that's pretty much it now, it's all people from outside, there's no local outfits anymore"* – [Uniformed Officer]

In other larger towns some lines were more 'part time', operating intermittently or only coming down over weekends. Relatedly, embeddedness within local populations also varied. Some would exclusively use locals as runners, sometimes additionally employing them as drivers to go back to their native city to restock, colluding with them to find a range of premises to stay in and using their contacts to advertise their 'branded' line. Others, however, were far more detached, seemingly only coming into contact with locals when they cuckooed or sold to them. While being mindful of the limitations of these data and not overlooking the often very striking similarities between these groups, it would therefore appear that they were far from homogenous. This in itself is a notable finding with regard to the wider understanding of the County Lines phenomenon. Since its emergence, there has been little attempt to recognise that lines will differ. As this case and the history of drug markets more broadly would suggest, however, it would be naive to believe they are all the same (Coomber, 2015). Perhaps most importantly in the context of local police responses, the levels of harm would also appear to vary in sometimes significant ways.

8.2.1 A time for discretion?

This recognition of variance raises some interesting implications for applying harm reduction principles to the local policing of this form of drug supply. Using the aforementioned 'ideal' line as a case in point, because of how it was functioning an argument could be made that it was a remarkably prime candidate for the police to have used discretion to monitor as opposed to taking immediate enforcement action

against. Indeed, officers acknowledged that drug market conditions in the respective town had worsened since the arrests had been made and the line 'dismantled'. A period of market 'instability' (see Brownstein et al., 2000) and several attempts by locals to rob some of the new 'out of town' runners seemingly led to an increase in violence. Corresponding to the findings of May and Hough (2001) discussed in chapter four, intelligence reports also suggested that some users were being forced to use some of their drugs when buying them, likely because of dealers becoming anxious following the arrests. Confirming these more noxious market conditions, when asked shortly after these arrests about an escalation in violence a detective responded:

> *"Yeah I think so. We've certainly had, over the last couple of weeks we've done a number of threat to life notices, where we're either telling the victims or potential victims that they're likely to be harmed unless they do certain things to prevent that. And we've been telling certain individuals, 'we know what's going on, we're looking at you, you're not to carry out any violent acts'. We had one chap who was tortured, another who were badly beaten, another who was stabbed."* – [Detective]

Following this, combined with the realisation of just how 'ideal' the line that they had taken out was, several officers mused that it might have been better to leave the line in place. As one noted:

> "*I guess if you're gonna have a line in your town you probably want one like that*" – [Uniformed Officer]

But these 'backstage' considerations were ultimately conjectural. Having got to the point where extensive intelligence had been gathered, warrants obtained and substantial resources deployed, what would have effectively amounted to 'turning a blind eye' to this dealer and his line was not a feasible option. The senior investigating officer was never going to be content with the outcome of the operation being an attempt to informally regulate the market by keeping a relatively non-problematic line in place. Beyond going against policy, it would have required an extraordinary act of braveness to attempt to justify it to their superiors, or to face the media if they

found out that the police had taken an active decision not to arrest a heroin and crack dealer. Noting this paradox an intelligence officer outlined:

> *"When you take people out then you just get people taking over. And that's when you get a lot of the violence actually. But if people found out the police weren't arresting some dealers though, they'd not be happy. I mean, they'd be pretty angry. Even internally, there would be a lot of people that wouldn't be happy with that, you know."* – [Intelligence Officer]

As classically depicted by Major Colville's "Hamsterdam" experiment in the TV show *The Wire* (see Wakeman, 2014), and recognised by many of the officers, even under the best intentions, actively going against the rules of the 'drug game' (Bacon, 2016a) was therefore not an attractive or viable position, especially in relation to those involved in supply and the heightened attention given to the topic of County Lines more generally. While often recognising that the resulting effect of their actions may lead to a worsening of conditions and an intensification of problems, because of the structures in which they operate and the symbolic nature of their role in enforcing drug laws, officers had little capacity to pursue alternative approaches or use discretion. Instead, with distinct risks associated with being seen as deviating from their prescribed 'crime fighter' role (Holdaway, 1983), policing in this context frequently appears destined to exacerbate some of the harmful aspects of drug markets.

8.2.2 The 'value neutral' problem

This case and the paradox surrounding it arguably represents the fundamental limitations of the police applying the philosophy of harm reduction in its pure form to the context of actors engaged in drug supply. As previously outlined in chapter four, the notion of harm reduction was pragmatically built upon the desire to reduce the harms experienced by those using drugs. Its fundamental principles are therefore based on reducing the 'primary harms' (Nadelmann, 2004) associated with drug consumption, while taking a 'value neutral' stance towards users and their use. Yet, as Blaustein et al. (2017) note, this perspective, quite intentionally, does not cover the 'secondary harms' associated with illicit drug distribution. A value neutral stance

is therefore not considered appropriate for those engaged in drug supply. Applied in this case, while officers recognised that the 'ideal' County Line was relatively unproblematic and created relatively minimal secondary harms, they were not willing or in a position to afford a value neutral stance towards those involved. Instead, even though the dealer did not engage in overt violence or exploitation he was still viewed as "*scum*" (Loftus, 2007) and worthy of punishment and stigmatisation. As one noted:

> *"Look, I mean he might have been a running a slick operation and not causing us much problems, but he was still a dealer. He was still selling heroin. Anyone doing that deserves to go to prison." –* [Uniformed Officer]

These attitudes are unsurprising given the officer's occupation, but they are also reflective of societal thought more broadly (Coomber, 2006). Even the most ardent critics of prohibition are unwilling to afford much sympathy to dealers (Nadelmann, 2004). With regard to the notion of applying harm reduction principles to drug market policing it could therefore be considered flawed to conceive of the police as harm reductionists. The relationship between the police and those involved in supply is fundamentally different to someone working in, for example, a drug testing facility and those who use the service (see Measham, 2019). As these observations during fieldwork suggest, directly transplanting the ethos of harm reduction to the context of the policing of drug markets therefore poses as theoretically and practically incompatible, as finding the 'space for discretion' (Marks and Howell, 2016) in this manner is not available towards dealers.

8.3 Drug market prioritisation: An 'organic' shift to Harm Reduction Policing?

Because of this, distinct challenges therefore appear to exist in terms of how policing responses to County Lines and drug markets more broadly, might move towards a more harm reduction focused approach. As theoretically sound as many of the arguments outlined in chapter four are, combined with some of the findings from the previous chapter, a conclusion that the policing of this area is destined to continue unmoved, chained within the structures in which it operates would not be

unreasonable. The 'field' of drug policing (see Chan, 1996) might be conceived as irrevocably wedded to rigid prohibitionist principles. However, policing County Lines was not simply 'business as usual'. It was certainly possible to 'detect change' (Bacon, 2016a). In fact, building on issues raised in chapter six, ideas about policing local drug markets differently, looking beyond prohibitionist logic and moving in some way towards applying what could generally be considered harm reduction principles were often the topic of frequent conversation, consideration and even application among officers. These seeds of an alternative approach, sown increasingly in response to the realisation of what could genuinely be achieved, began to show signs of sprouting in the latter stages of fieldwork.

Sensitised to the perspective going into the field I expected that I would need to explicitly raise these ideas in order to illicit relevant data. I also envisaged that this perspective might, at least at times, be given short shrift. Similar to Bacon (2016b), on occasion 'harm reduction' was considered analogous for 'supply' or 'crime' reduction. For some officers it appeared to be 'axiomatic knowledge' (Sackmann, 1991) that arresting someone for a supply related offence inevitably reduced harm. However, among many there was also often a genuine recognition of a wider concept of harm conforming to the notion of drug supply externalities and how this could translate into a genuinely different form of drug market policing. Without being prompted, it soon became clear that these were ideas often on the minds of many officers and that there was genuine consideration of how this could feed into both overarching drug policing aims and practice. Take, for example, an exchange I recorded in my field notes that took place over an early morning coffee before I accompanied officers executing a warrant on a flat suspected of harbouring County Lines dealers:

> **Sergeant**: "*There is a school of thought that says as long as they're not harming anyone and causing any issues to the community then you should just let them continue. Certainly, you have to be very careful who you take out because, as we've found, the backfill can actually be a lot worse.*"
>
> **Officer**: "*Yeah, for example, I'm pretty sure where I live in a cul-de-sac that a house down the road is dealing drugs. Although I haven't got any proof, you*

see cars coming by, stopping outside for 10 minutes then driving off. But that doesn't have any impact on me or the neighbours, so I'm not really bothered by it."

J.S: *"How feasible would it be to apply that thinking to County Lines?"*

Sergeant: *"Well that's sort of what we're looking to do with the tasking process. Although we're not saying we won't take those people out eventually, we're saying we'll take those that score highly on the MoRile first. But to do it properly it would have to be a formal policy put in by place by those from up high. And that's pretty tricky politically. I mean the Daily Mail wouldn't be too happy with that would they? You'd also have to get every officer on board and agreeing to it. Because you can't legally stop an officer from making an arrest if a crime's been committed. If I wanted to arrest someone for doing 31mph in a 30 mph zone then I have every right to do that. You see what I mean? You'd need to have every officer on board if you were going to do that formally."*

Officer: *"But there definitely is some precedent for it. At the festivals in the summer we won't be arresting people for that. There's people everywhere smoking cannabis. It's not that we turn a blind eye, but we don't make arrests."*

These and other similar conversations, were not borne out of an awareness of the academic literature on the part of the officers I spent time with. Ideas of using law enforcement more strategically as a regulatory tool to manage and shape the local illicit market were not derived from being familiar with the work of Bacon (2016a) or Stevens (2013). Rather, they had emerged out of sometimes decade's worth of drug policing experience and the observation that not only were drugs, their use and those supplying them as prevalent as ever but, especially given the prevalence of County Lines, the issues surrounding their markets were considered to be getting worse. Corresponding to the vernacular of Parker (2006), 'keeping a lid on things' or, as one officer referred to it, *"the game of whack a mole"* were typically cited as the main aim of policing the local heroin and crack markets. Secondary related aims

conforming to more general contemporary policing priorities (see Charman, 2017), included keeping communities happy and safeguarding those considered vulnerable. Notions of prohibition, a 'drug war' and ridding communities of heroin and crack were non-existent.

With these more pragmatic aims placed at the centre of drug policing focus, it could be understood as somewhat inevitable that some officers naturally began to consider alternative approaches. Moving towards a more nuanced approach corresponding with harm reduction principles would therefore appear not to be an abstract, academic idea. Instead, it appeared to be organically coming to the fore. Indeed, rather than considering such an approach as a radical shift in the nature of their work for some officers it was considered to be close to current practice. When I posed the idea to a detective, for example, she replied:

> *"Well, to be honest that's pretty much what we do now. If they don't cause harm then we're not going to be taking action, they're probably not even on our radar."* – [Detective]

As highlighted in previous chapters, as with much discussion on the wider nature of contemporary policing and what they were able to achieve, this was also often framed in the context of austerity. It was suggested that, if it were ever possible to try and target all dealers, the lack of resources they were now faced with made this was an impossibility.

> *"Last time I looked we had over forty different lines operating across the force. With the resources we've got now, and everything else we have to do, we can be looking at probably three, max' four, at any one time."* – [Detective]

Illustrating the limitations of drug policing to target all those engaged in supply, I lost track of the number of times that various officers stated how dealers who kept their 'heads down' and stayed inconspicuous would be unlikely to ever have action taken against them, even if they were dealing crack or heroin. On several occasions officers across different teams joked that, if they were ever to be unemployed or in need of money, a relatively easy and safe way of remedying this would be to *"deal a bit of drugs"*. Implicit in these and other similar conversations, therefore, was the

recognition that ultimately the police only ever really undertook action against a select few dealers. As others have noted, acting on intelligence, responding to the most serious crimes and making cases against the most serious criminals can generally be considered "business as usual" for drug detective work (Bacon (2016b, p.134). The police 'cherry picking' particular dealers to focus on has long been a fundamental feature of this aspect of their work (Collison, 1995). Taken together, this would suggest moving towards a more nuanced, informal regulatory policing strategy might not be quite as big a step as it may first appear.

8.3.1 Prioritisation as a harm reduction principle?

While seemingly reflecting a general trend in the policing of local drug markets, these notions of strategic enforcement were particularly prominent among officers following a new 'prioritisation' process which had tentatively been proposed and subsequently implemented in response to County Lines during the fieldwork. As alluded to by the Sergeant in the 'pre-warrant' conversation recounted above, using the MoRile system a 'scoring' system was introduced involving each known line in the force area being individually assessed and ranked based on intelligence. The rationale for this was that it would directly feed into a tasking process, allowing the most harmful groups using serious violence or causing significant disruption within a local community to be specifically targeted, focusing limited resources on those causing the most problems. Notably, such an approach did not appear to be unique to the force I was researching with, as similar processes were reported as being used elsewhere.

Parallels can naturally be made between this process of formal prioritisation and the notion of applying harm reduction principles to the policing of drug markets. As a guiding drug policing model, it implicitly acknowledges that not all dealers can be the focus of policing efforts and that the specific targeting of those judged most problematic is more appropriate. This conformed to the realities of what the officers engaged with on a day to day basis in relation to County Lines, as it was acknowledged that they did not have the capacity to focus on every group operating in their area.

As illustrated by the following data, I did come across one officer who explicitly stated this was something he felt uncomfortable with:

> **Uniformed Officer:** *"Yeah, I've heard that from senior management about being careful who you take out because it might cause more problems. You do have to think, 'are they going to be replaced? are they going to be worse?' But that just doesn't sit well with me. I don't like the thought that while we're sitting in here there are people out there that we're not going after".*
>
> *(Shout from the corridor of the station that it was time to execute a warrant on a flat suspected of harbouring County Lines dealers)*
>
> **Uniformed Officer***: (jumping out of his seat and putting his stab vest on) "And anyway, doing these warrants, busting down doors, I wouldn't want to stop doing that whenever we can, I love it!"*

But apart from this, officers discussed it with me and among themselves in positive terms. It appeared to make sense and was generally considered a pragmatic, appropriate response. There was no suggestion of the 'fight' against County Lines being a war that could be 'won' in the sense of the presence of 'out of town' dealers being eradicated. The term *"we can't arrest our way out of this"* became an almost daily soundbite. Instead, reflecting the general perception of local drug market policing, prioritising particularly problematic lines was considered as simply formalising what was typically already the general realities of how they were practically seeking to respond to the issue at a local level.

8.3.2 Mitigating the 'value neutral' problem

While therefore not a necessarily overly radical step either in practice, as a formalised strategic model, a policy of prioritisation appears to indicate how some of the challenges of applying harm reduction principles might be mitigated and how a more nuanced strategy aligning with such ideas could be applied in practice. In particular, it would appear to negate some of the practical aforementioned issues regarding a 'value neutral stance' towards those involved in supply (Blaustein et al., 2017), and the unfeasible prospect of police 'turning a blind eye' towards dealers they are

primed to take action against. By ranking lines, identifying those that cause the most harm and specifically targeting them, the unviable position of making a decision not to pursue or arrest dealers out of fear that doing so may lead to more deleterious drug market conditions should be avoided or at least minimised. Done correctly, those groups causing limited drug market issues are unlikely to find themselves the target of specific activity. Instead, with their sights trained on those causing the most harm, officers can pursue dealers with a sense of 'mission' and make arrests, reasonably suspecting that the outcome be a positive effect on local drug market conditions. This likely presents as a way of achieving Skogan's (2008) dictum on police reform of turning abstract concepts and theoretical propositions - which the notion of applying harm reduction principles to the policing of drug markets could be argued to be up until this point – into practically orientated, day to day policing activities officers can engage with and pursue.

Importantly, a formal strategy of prioritisation also means that operating within an acceptable prohibitionist presentational front is still possible. The Sergeant's caveat in the conversation above that they will get to the lesser ranking groups 'eventually', and the other officer's assurance that despite not making arrests they were 'not turning a blind eye' is illustrative of this. In reality, both almost certainly knew that by prioritising the most harmful groups they would ultimately keep 'creaming off the top', generally not getting deep enough to restrict levels of supply in any meaningful way but hopefully being of longer-term benefit to the market. However, the problem of the binary 'good versus evil' nature of prohibitionist logic is that any example of the police not fully adhering to their given role risks them being accused of dereliction of duty, or at worse in favour of the other side winning (see Nadelmann, 2004). This, combined with the cultural emphasis on 'action' (Holdaway, 1983), perhaps explains why the one officer who expressed his aversion to the approach interpreted it primarily as meaning he would be prevented from undertaking action against dealers. Yet, despite these structural conditions, as illustrated by the positive responses by most other officers, it is seemingly possible to reconcile this more selective approach of prioritisation with the ascribed role the police play with regard to prohibition and the 'law on the books' (Beletsky et al., 2005.)

8.3.3 Concerns of outsider perceptions

As discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the symbolism of drug market policing (Coomber et al., 2017), beyond the internal acceptability of such an approach, there is also the consideration of external pressures from those outside the policing organisation and the wider public. This issue of external perceptions arose early in the fieldwork with a senior detective who, before the process of prioritisation had been formally introduced, openly acknowledged to me that the police had accepted local drug markets were always going to exist. I suggested to him that because of this, a logical end point was that the police would want those who were doing so to do it in ways that were least harmful as possible. He informally agreed, but was ultimately concerned of how this would be perceived by outsiders:

> *"I know (sighs). How do I sell that message to the public though? How do I sell that message to the public that actually, as an organisation or even as a partnership, we're accepting that there's always going to be drug dealing? That is really tricky. I mean the wording might have to be slightly different to that. You might have to say that, 'we accept that with the resources we've currently got, the problems that are being posed and the demands on the street, we can't target every drug dealer, so we're going to target those who, you know, commit the most harm to vulnerable people.' And if people think, 'well actually they're accepting nice drug dealing, and being anti towards nasty drug dealing' well that's…yeah…that might be ok'".* – [Senior Detective]

This tension highlights the contradictions between the presentational front and the backstage realities of drug policing (Goffman, 1959). It also further illustrates the 'symbolic' qualities of such activity, its communicative qualities and central concern with how it is viewed by others (Coomber et al., 2017). Notably, however, subsequent observations throughout the fieldwork period suggested that this more pragmatic model of prioritisation could resolve some of these tensions. This was specifically illustrated when accompanying this detective at partnership meetings or when he gave presentations at various events and discussed the new approach of prioritisation. Couched in positive terms, he stressed how important it was for the police to specifically target those causing the most harm. To back this up, a concrete

example of why some lines were being made a priority was also typically provided. A fatal stabbing that occurred *"just 150 yards from where we are now"* was, for example, recounted to attendees at one event. Selective enforcement was therefore presented not just as a pragmatic and productive approach, but one corresponding to the general role of the police in responding to local drug markets and their related issues.

Highlighting the potential for a strategy of prioritisation to bridge the gap between a more harm oriented policing strategy and the traditional drug market 'eliminator' role expected of the police, those in attendance at many of these events appeared to interpret it as an acceptable position. In contrast to the general pessimism reported in the previous chapter regarding the impact of crackdown operations, this was viewed favourably by those from other organisations. At one event I did note an attendee lean over to the person sitting next to them and concernedly whisper *"are they saying that they can't stop this?"*. But generally, at these presentations, meetings and in subsequent interviews with those working for partner agencies the response was positive. Prioritisation was interpreted not as the police being weak and surrendering to the local drug market, but that they were seeking to actively target those dealers causing serious harm. As one representative of a partner agency stated:

> *"I think I am in favour of that because it's the dangerous ones that are harming people, you know that really are harming people. I've heard some awful things where they've used awful violence. They put a cat in a microwave. I've heard some awful things. But, yeah, I think, the thing is, me personally, when I work with the police, I would rely on them to know what is the best thing to do. And if it's the ones that are harming people like that and they think, 'actually, we need to get that first because that then might reduce the harm', then I'm all for it."* – [Welfare Officer, Housing]

Others related it back to their own practice and the ways that they themselves had to prioritise:

"That makes total sense. You know it's not dissimilar to what we do with clients. When our caseload is increasing, we just have to devote time and energy on those that are the highest risk. It just makes sense." – Drug Service Manager

"So if you've got a serious and organised crime group that are clearly doing something illegal but they're not actually hurting local people and the community, but then you've got the other group that is, then you're going to choose that one, aren't you? So, yeah, I would be happy to explain that to people if it came out to the public that that's what was happening. But it's the same with anything, you have to prioritise your workload. It's the same with any service we commission. Anything we do, there's always a criteria or a threshold or something that filters the workflow. Because you have to, you can't accept everything." – [Community Safety Manager]

Just as for most of the officers I spent time with, these responses suggest that for those organisations outside the police, it is the drug market 'externalities' (Caulkins, 2002) that is their chief concern. It could therefore be argued that attempts to symbolically present to outsiders that the fight against the local supply of heroin and crack is one that they are still attempting to win in simple terms of prohibition are not necessary or desirable. Returning to Skogan's (2004) metaphor referred to in the previous chapter, it would appear acceptable for officers to lay their cards down on the table and be open about what they can achieve and what their priorities are. A shift to a more harm reduction orientated approach would appear not only acceptable on pragmatic grounds but encouraged by many who, being aware or exposed to some of the issues associated with County Lines, placed reducing these at the forefront of their concerns rather than reducing supply.

8.3.4 'Guiding' focused crackdown operations

In addition to positively informing the strategic response to County Lines more generally, a formalised process of prioritisation also appeared to have significant potential to guide crackdown operations to operate in a more focused way. As discussed in the previous chapter, these resource intensive activities resulted in mass

arrests, but often of those at the very lowest levels, or sometimes of groups such as the 'ideal' line that were not overly problematic. Providing insight into why this occurred, some of the detectives involved talked of how these operations were undertaken in geographically focused ways. Once a town was chosen and resources acquired, corresponding with previous observations of how the tactic is used (Bacon, 2016a; Collison, 1995), undercover officers were typically deployed to engage in test purchasing and become exposed to as many lines as they could. Following this, detectives would then cast their net as wide as was practically feasible, trying to generate evidence on as many of those involved in supply as they could. As one outlined:

"What tends to happen is, if we target an area geographically, so say we want to take out all the drugs gangs in XXXX (town), and we've put some assets into that area, we basically end up buying the drugs from the people who offer themselves up to sell the drugs. So, what I'm trying to say is we might end up buying the drugs from a non-violent gang, or a gang that we're not massively worried about. So, we might clear out four or five drug gangs in one town, but we might not end up targeting our most dangerous groups. It's like, you know, fish in a barrel. There's loads of fish coming out, but it might not necessarily be the one that we want." – [Detective]

Similarly, it was also mentioned that once an operation was underway and evidence began being collected, the decision of which lines they would ultimately attempt to take action against was not made on the basis on their characteristics and propensity for harm, but rather on the ease in which a conviction could be made:

"When we did XXXX (name of operation) we had to choose which lines we were going to dismantle. Because we touched about 20 lines, we touched a lot of lines, bought from a lot of lines. And what we did do is followed our evidence. So the people that we had our strongest cases on, we followed those lines up the chain, and we tried dismantling those lines, some of them quite successfully. What we didn't necessarily do is sit down, have a conversation and say 'ok, which is our most dangerous? Let's try and take out those ones'. We did what was easiest for us to do. We took out the ones with the evidence.

And there's a lot of reasons for that. One is resources, one is time – we needed to get those people on that operation back to their day jobs because they'd been seconded out. And probably a lot of it would have been that we didn't really understand which ones were our most violent actually." – [Detective]

These insights are illuminating in understanding the results of these and similar operations undertaken against County Lines. Further building on the work of Coomber et al. (2017) and the analysis of crackdowns presented in the previous chapter, they provide valuable insight into why much of their outcomes appear antithetical to ideas of reducing drug market harms.

Notably, however, subsequent discussions about undertaking operations within the context of a formal process of prioritisation suggested some of these issues could be mitigated. Further highlighting a strategy of prioritisation's capacity for more effective and targeted drug policing, it was noted how future crackdown operations informed by this could look beyond simply focusing on one particular town and attempting to have the most amount of impact via traditional measures of success such as numbers of arrests, lines disrupted and seizures made. Instead, it was suggested that resources and activity could be targeted towards those groups already identified as particularly harmful. As a senior investigating officer of a previous operation stated:

"So, we're currently working on a process of how we can forget the geography - which unfortunately makes things difficult around finance and who's paying for it - but forget the geography and just hunt down our top lines through a similar tactic, but by being more nimble around how we move resources round and how we target them. So, therefore, we're always continually taking out the very top rather than concentrating on a geographical area. And in that way, we know who we want before we start, whereas before we were just looking at an area, whereas now we can look at what lines we want to tackle before the operation and we can already be having that conversation up in London or wherever they're coming from and try to coordinate it a bit better."
– [Senior Detective]

Although unlikely to be a panacea, and raising some challenges around matters of finance, formal prioritisation was therefore considered as a way of helping crackdown operations to be more focused. As a result, officers considered this as a more beneficial way of generating the type of results they were after. In turn, this would suggest their outcomes should more closely align with the aims of responding to drug supply externalities and correspond to more nuanced harm reduction aims.

8.4 Prioritising County Lines in practice: Challenges of capacity and subjectivity

Although in many ways a somewhat subtle change, the adoption of a formalised prioritisation strategy would appear to demonstrate how the policing of drug markets can be progressively adapted within the confines of the existing prohibition framework. As Bacon (2016b) notes, although far from ideal, within the context of prohibition such reforms are the best that can be hoped for. However, as potentially beneficial as well as internally and externally acceptable as a policy of prioritisation may theoretically be, its success and how it ultimately functions would appear rooted in how it operates in practice. While the process was only beginning to be fully implemented by the end of the fieldwork period, I was able to observe and analyse some of the practical realities of undertaking it. Out of this, several potential issues were identifiable.

One immediate concern among officers was having the necessary resources to undertake the research, analysis and accurate ranking of each line operating in the force area. The number of known lines believed to be operating across the force varied during the fieldwork period, peaking at fifty-five and rarely going below forty. This appeared to be quite an accurate snapshot of the County Lines picture across the force area. Streams of intelligence came in daily from a range of sources and any new lines that started operating quickly became known. However, even at its lowest number, it was considered unlikely that there would be the capacity to undertake research of sufficient quality on all of the lines and for them to be regularly assessed in detail and scored in relation to one another. As one officer noted:

"At the moment it looks like we've got over fifty County Lines across the force. If I'm being honest I don't think we've got the capacity to do the threat, harm and risk around all of them, or the research." – [Intelligence Officer]

Another potential issue was undue influence by certain officers and the role of subjectivity. Rather than being systematic and objective, it was suggested that the decision of which lines became prioritised and targeted may be significantly influenced by, or even a direct product of, internal dynamics and who 'made the loudest noise':

"I think you'll find that it all comes down to [different officers'] personality about who gets targeted. That can be a good thing because you get some who get really hot on a violent County Line and go after them hard. But then it also means you get dragged in to dealing with some that are really not worth it. You know, a complaint will come in about there's some dealing going on in this street and the officer in that area will respond to it and say, 'Right, ok, we're going to get them', all the while though we know that there's actually a much more dangerous group operating a few streets away from them that we would be much better off targeting." - [Detective]

This particular issue comes as no great surprise. Loftus et al. (2015), for example, noted a tendency for officers to overemphasise the scale and nature of some drug supply groups in order to obtain extra resources and use covert operatives. Similarly, it was acknowledged that which lines were considered most harmful was likely to be also guided by different officers' own motivations. Drawing on previous experiences of conducting assessments of local organised crime groups, some officers discussed the various informal ways and means of ensuring that a particular group could become a priority. One reported way was to increase the amount of reports and intelligence submitted about one group. Another was to use the scope for discretion during a 'threat, harm, risk' assessment to ensure that it became graded highly:

"The more intelligence we submit on a line, and the more activity we do on a line, the higher its threat, harm, risk. That's not to say, if we had a number of intelligence sources and a line was constantly being mentioned by different

people, and it was thought that they were doing certain things, then it would rise anyway. But the police are probably the biggest influencer around how to generate a score. And, to be honest, I've done it myself, I've done it before to manipulate a situation. So, for example, if I was a Sergeant in (gives names of towns), wherever and I wanted assistance with activity on a drug line, I could manipulate a situation by putting in a number of intelligence reports, by doing a little bit of activity, then all of a sudden the threat looks a lot bigger, and you get some support. In the same way as if you'd got a handful of PCSOs working in different parts of a town. If you've got one PCSO who's excellent, and really enthusiastic about drugs in the community and submitting a lot of intelligence, then the line working in their area is going to be flagged up a lot higher, than in an area with a PCSO who may be excellent with reassuring the community and working with OAPs." – [Detective]

Aligning with Collison's (1995) observation that the decision of which dealers to target is often heavily influenced by measures such as detective's intuition and perspective, there would seem significant propensity for these decisions to be unduly influenced. Although somewhat inevitable and not overlooking the potential value in allowing for certain levels of professional judgement, the extent to which this could occur risks fundamentally undermining the wider process and what it is attempting to achieve.

Some of these issues and the wider reliability of the prioritisation process were notably put under the spotlight in the latter stages of the fieldwork when a local heroin user was murdered by a member of a County Line. Undertaken in a brutal fashion similar to an execution, it would be expected that the respective line involved would be ranked somewhere near the top of those considered most harmful. However, rather than the line being considered 'high risk' and the subject of targeted policing activity, it was ranked at the very low end of who was considered a priority. As one detective explained:

"There was a guy called XXXX who was murdered in XXXX (town). He was killed by a County Line, which on our list was right down at the bottom. So, we'd either not got round to grading their risk, because we didn't feel like they were

an issue, or we graded the risk as very low. So, they were at number thirty-five. And yet they carry out a killing. And it wasn't a moment of anger, they'd got someone up to carry out the killing. Got a taxi there, or a local transport there. Did what they wanted to do, then came away. So, it was very calculated in terms of what they were doing." – [Senior Detective]

The fact that the line responsible was so far down the list in terms of who was to be prioritised was inevitably of significant concern to the officers pursuing the prioritisation strategy. Unsurprisingly, the group was reassessed and placed at the top, becoming a priority to have action taken against. In some respects, therefore, this could be seen as evidence of the process working, with the police appropriately shifting their attention towards a line that clearly had the willingness and propensity for the most serious of harms. A certain amount of reaction can be considered inevitable in a process of prioritisation, with officers responding to intelligence or offences to make a judgement on who is the most harmful. However, what could be considered concerning is that those assessing the 'threat' of the line had either been unable to identify or misjudged the propensity for harm this line had and that it took a highly organised murder for them to become a priority.

8.4.1 Prioritisation and the 'fast paced' nature of County Lines

In addition to these wider challenges were issues associated with applying this prioritisation process to the specific context of County Lines. Speaking to the challenging nature of responding to these 'out of town' groups at a local level and the way that the County Lines supply model has broken down the more traditional ways of understanding the levels of the drug market (Coomber and Moyle, 2018), a particular challenge was being able to generate a detailed understanding of who was involved and their characteristics. Because of the itinerant nature of County Lines and the unfamiliarity of the 'out of town' dealers involved, it was considered difficult to create an accurate picture of the current supplier landscape.

"The problem with County Lines is that it moves so quickly. If they're rotating the people who are working in your area, just to try and keep people under the radar from the police, well one week you might have a bunch of nutters

working in your force area, the next week those people might be elsewhere
and you'll have people who might be more calm." – [Uniformed Officer]

This appeared to make it more challenging to make an informed decision as to which groups should be prioritised. In comparison to more generic local organised crime groups, where officers would generally have a good knowledge of those involved, the more fluid, fast paced nature of County Lines groups made them difficult to assess. Speaking to this, one officer compared the situation in the County Lines dominated town he now worked in to a major city where he had previously worked:

"Up in XXXX we've got a number of gangs there who we've known for a long,
long time. They were born and bred in XXXX. Then we've got ones that are
more Somalian based who may not have been there all their lives but have
been there for a long time. But as a force we're quite comfortable with them,
because we know who they are, we know (who) they are if we need to pick
them up. We know who they hang around with. There are methods of getting
intelligence. So it's quite easy to pick up the information for them of what
they're doing and where they are. And we've got some dangerous people
there. But it's not massively difficult to keep a lid on it. Whereas here we've
just got an unknown quantity, which is the real danger of it. We've literally
got no idea of who's coming in and out." – [Detective]

These challenges and the wider issues associated with the 'fast paced' and fluid nature of County Lines groups, and the very nature of 'import' markets, were further highlighted in the workings of the multi- agency 'disruption panel' set up by the police to respond to County Lines. Bringing together a range of organisations including housing, community safety and drug services, it intended to focus on the top three ranked groups, meeting on a monthly basis to share information and build up a detailed intelligence picture that would help enforcement action be undertaken. However, after the first meeting it became clear that the nature of the groups meant that the protocol for information sharing was made almost redundant. Information from a housing provider suspecting that 'out of town' dealers were based in the flats of one of their tenants two weeks ago, for example, was considered out of date and effectively useless given that they had moved on just days after. While the

195

establishment of the multi-agency group could be seen as a welcome development in the response to County Lines, providing officers with the type of partnership work argued to be invaluable by many in chapter six, the very nature of what they were attempting to respond to suggests that in order to be a success, such approaches need to adapt to this specific context.

Taken altogether, these insights would suggest that responding to County Lines in a manner similar to more generic organised crime groups or local drug dealing groups is inappropriate. As part of a more harm reduction focused drug policing strategy, Bacon (2016a, p.162) talks of an informal "drug trade code of practice" that might be applied by officers to the context of a local market. Even with the general disbanding of drug squads over recent years (see Bacon, 2013) this might still be applicable in areas where indigenous dealers continue to service the market. However, in the context of the many provincial towns now structured as 'import' markets and serviced by dealers adopting the County Lines methodology, this seems problematic. A policy of prioritisation may pose as a pragmatic, welcome progression with the potential for much more effective drug policing responses to County Lines, but there would appear to be significant challenges in operationalising it and for it to realise its potential.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented ethnographic findings and analysis of how the perspective of applying harm reduction principles to the policing of local drug markets could be applied to the specific context of County Lines. It would appear that the application of a pure harm reduction philosophy to this form of policing is both theoretically and practically flawed. The status of drug dealers and the expectation of policing means that such discretion is not possible, even in the case of an almost 'ideal' line where the outcome of taking action is likely to cause greater market harm. Yet, notably, a formal process of prioritisation would appear to present as a genuine way of moving drug policing towards a more nuanced, targeted approach. While far from a panacea, by mitigating some of the issues surrounding the 'value neutral' problem (Blaustein et al., 2017) and proving both internally and externally

acceptable, it poses as a genuine way of guiding more selective enforcement without diverting from the prohibitionist, symbolic role that the police have to play in the drug war 'spectacle' (Edelman, 1988).

Applied to specific police activity such as crackdowns, the findings also suggest these can be undertaken in a way that is more focused, effective and problem orientated. Exploring this provides greater insight into why the outcomes of previous crackdown operations occurred, significantly building on the analysis of Coomber et al. (2017). That noted, with all of its modest but genuine potential, there are also clearly areas that risk rendering the strategy of prioritisation problematic. The role of subjectivity, undue influence, and the broader challenges related to the nature of County Lines groups and 'out of town' dealers suggests that, in practice, ensuring that those who pose the most harm are always those subjected to police attention might not always be achieved. Responding to the harms of evolving 'import' markets (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992) and the actors that service them therefore presents as fundamentally challenging.

9.0 Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This final chapter draws the thesis to a conclusion. Having reached this point, it is worth briefly recapping its content. After introducing the thesis in the first chapter, a set of three narrative literature reviews were provided. The second chapter began by critically outlining some key conceptual drug market issues. Serving as the specific drug market focus of the thesis, chapter three addressed the development of County Lines. Chapter four then raised some perspectives regarding how markets have historically been responded to by the police and the capacity for alternative ways of thinking about and undertaking this activity. In particular, it critically outlined the perspectives of harm reduction principles (Bacon, 2016a) and symbolic policing (Coomber et al., 2017) addressed in subsequent chapters. After outlining and justifying the methodological approach taken, the original empirical findings and analysis were presented. Reflecting the exploratory nature of the research, the first of these chapters sought to provide a greater insight into County Lines from a local 'import' context and how, as a drug market development, it was being interpreted by those responding to it. Grounded in ethnographic fieldwork, the following two chapters sought to detail some of these local responses, analysing them specifically in relation to the aforementioned drug policing perspectives. The aim of this final chapter is to conclude the thesis by outlining its main arguments, key findings and contributions to knowledge.

Specifically referring back to the research questions that were formed and developed as part of the exploratory approach adopted throughout the research, the chapter firstly attempts to synthesise and discuss the empirical analysis presented in the findings chapters. It begins by reflecting on some of the insights generated regarding County Lines and the associated evolution of local heroin and crack markets. In particular, it highlights the fear generated by these 'import' markets and the threat of dangerous outsiders. Leading on from this, the following section discusses the

symbolic nature of much County Lines policing. Heightened attention on the topic somewhat inevitably led to high-profile responses, however, this typically led to experiences of frustration among officers, disappointment among others and outcomes seemingly antithetical to wider, more nuanced, aims. The chapter then discusses the findings related to harm reduction principles. With the research having posed as an opportunity to explore this perspective, in addition to the empirical insights regarding the extent to which responses can be understood in relation to this, it highlights how these served to develop this perspective. Illustrating some of the practical implications of the findings, the penultimate section provides a short reflection on the role of both social and drug policy in the context responding to County Lines, stressing their overall importance but also how they interplay with policing. The thesis concludes by reflecting on the contributions to knowledge made, the limitations of the study and the implications for future research.

9.2 The advancement of County Lines: Market evolutions and fear

Focusing on provincial areas where the presence of County Lines networks were suggested to have emerged and intensified in recent years, an overarching aim running throughout this research was to explore how the phenomenon was being interpreted and responded to by police located in affected towns. Faced with the apparent 'evolution' of their local heroin and crack markets (Coomber and Moyle, 2018), the associated establishment of 'import' retail markets (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992) and the harms associated with this outreach supply methodology, it sought to explore how this was being understood locally and how the police sought to counter the issue. A key part of achieving this was to generate greater critical insight into the phenomenon. This was particularly important given that, being a recent development, little academic research into the specific nature and realities of County Lines had been undertaken. As has been previously highlighted, this was especially the case at the commencement of the research.

To summarise what has been written, Coomber and Moyle (2018) provide a useful overview, including the machinations of this particular drug supply methodology and

the roles of those involved. Others have specifically focused on the involvement and experiences of urban youths, often framing it in relation to the workings of 'gangs' (Andell and Pitts, 2017; Robinson et al., 2018; Storrod and Densley, 2017; Whittaker et al., 2019; Windle and Briggs, 2015a). As outlined in chapter three, it is therefore this body of literature, supplemented by influential annual NCA intelligence reports (NCA, 2015; 2016; 2017), that comprises the existing state of knowledge in relation to County Lines. More general gaps in knowledge can be considered undoubtedly to remain but, especially given the dominant focus of the available literature, these can be considered particularly prevalent with regard to the impact of these groups on the areas they embed their outreach practice in.

By providing insight on aspects such as 'branding', the nature of the violence and how it manifests in affected areas, and how the supply model fits within enduring concerns such as the dichotomy between 'open' or 'closed' retail markets (Buerger, 1992; May and Hough, 2004), the findings offer an important contribution to further understanding the 'changing shape' of street level heroin and crack supply outside of major urban conurbations (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). This therefore goes in some way to answer the research question of 'What is County Lines?'. One of the most notable aspects of these findings was the identification of the variance amid the drug supply operations that fall under the umbrella categorisation of 'County Lines'. As detailed in chapter eight, a close examination of the varied forms of data and the specific case of the 'ideal line' suggests that, while, as is the impression given by official reports (e.g. NCA, 2017), these groups undoubtedly have striking similarities, there is often subtle or even more pronounced variation among them, including how they operate and their impact on 'host' locales. As argued in chapter two, recognising the variance and propensity for adaptation rather than relying on overly homogenised conceptions of drug markets has significant analytic value (Coomber, 2015; Coomber and Maher, 2006; Dorn et al., 1992; Zaitch, 2005). For this recent drug supply evolution, the importance for nuanced and socialised understandings of County Lines dominated markets and how they operate would therefore appear to remain (Dwyer and Moore, 2010). Indeed, speaking to both this and the wider gaps in knowledge on the topic, the fact that this observation was so noteworthy arguably

illustrates that, despite the extraordinary amount of media and public attention, not only does there continue to be a lack of rigorous academic enquiry on the County Lines phenomenon, but there has also been a general lack of critical reflection.

Complementing these insights and laying crucial conceptual groundwork for the ethnographic component of the research was how, in the face of this high-profile drug supply development, local officers initially interpreted the burgeoning 'import' (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992) heroin and crack markets in their local towns and the actors involved. Given the nature of how the County Lines issue has been constructed, its 'newsy' nature (Wacquant, 2008), and how its rise to prominence has been built on intense law enforcement scrutiny and awareness campaigns (APPG, 2017; NCA, 2016), capturing this local understanding was particularly important and serves to answer the research question of 'How is County Lines being interpreted and understood by police officers in affected areas?'. Notably aligning with subsequently published findings over the course of the research period (e.g. Whittaker et al., 2019), the focus placed on these groups' 'business-like' nature and drive to maximise profits highlights how they are understood primarily in relation to their commercial nature. This is reinforced considering how this was contrasted with the more traditional, less organised ways that the supply of these drugs was understood to take place in provincial areas (see Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007; May and Hough, 2004).

More theoretically, conceptions of 'purity' and 'danger' (Douglas, 1966) appear to abound in relation to County Lines at a local level, with the very nature of 'import' (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992) markets feeding into this understanding and representation. This appeared to be heightened given that these drug markets were based in provincial, more rural areas and being serviced by dealers of urban origin. The presence of 'foreign', more commercial dealers from urban areas were understood by officers as being 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966 p. 33) and 'polluting' their local areas. Such interpretations also appeared to rely on the perpetuation of both 'pusher myths' (Coomber, 2006) and 'gang talk' (Hallsworth and Young, 2008), with recourse to more 'expressive' rather than 'instrumental' (Storrod and Densley, 2017) explanations of violence, for example, used to evidence the new threat these 'out of town' dealers represented to their area. When understanding

markets and how they are being interpreted, taking into account the interplay between the rural and the urban would therefore appear to be important. This suggests the value of expanding Reuter and MacCoun's, (1992) conceptualisation of retail markets not just in relation to the 'distance travelled' by their actors, but also the wider geographical and cultural context of whether the market is based in a rural or urban area and whether those servicing them are of urban or rural origin (see Coomber, 2015).

Recognising the anxieties induced by this drug market development and reported by many of the respondents in this research, consistent with the numerous 'drug scares' that have manifested across western societies (Reinarman and Levine, 1989), County Lines could therefore be considered as representing a further incarnation and evolution of drug related fear for provincial areas. Coomber (2011, p. 25) notes that:

> *"Things that disturb us often do so because they are other to our sense of identity, to system order and thus to our feeling of security in the world. Drugs are abject and have long been associated with 'others' those seen as threatening the safety and stability of a group or society."*

While in the case of County Lines it is the 'externalities' (Caulkins, 2002) associated with this particular drug supply methodology that have raised intense fears and concern rather than the more traditional focus of the substances themselves, understanding and situating perceptions of it within this context would appear to have significant analytic value. This is not to suggest, as has often been the case for drug related issues (e.g. Young, 1971), that County Lines be understood simply as a moral panic. Doing so risks overlooking the genuine evolution in street level markets that has occurred (Coomber and Moyle, 2018), the contemporary commercial impetus of many young people in urban areas (Whittaker et al., 2019; McLean et al., 2018) and the harms associated with the supply methodology (Robinson et al., 2018; Windle and Briggs, 2015a). However, the very nature of how the phenomenon has been constructed and the surrounding discourses clearly align with contemporary societal anxieties such as escalating street violence, the intensifying presence and culture of 'gangs' and the exploitation of vulnerable people (Coliandris, 2015; Hallsworth, 2013). Specifically for police officers, the understanding of the

emergence of County Lines being facilitated by reductions to their service, the lack of support from others, or the perception that they were more of an 'easy target' compared to their urban counterparts (see NCA, 2016), meant it also often appeared to cut to the core of anxieties internal to them and their local teams, inevitably influencing how they responded to the issue.

9.3 Symbolic responses to County Lines as the 'new face' of UK drug market policing

Building on these insights regarding local officers' understandings, it is through the lens of 'symbolic policing' (Coomber et al., 2017) that much of the resulting initial policing responses to County Lines and their outcomes can arguably be understood. By adopting a more 'insider' role within the policing organisation (Brown, 1996; Reiner and Newburn, 2007), the ethnographic findings bring to light how this translated into the various initial responses to it. Just as the County Lines phenomenon represents a new and challenging threat for the police, it also represents something new to tackle. Solutions need to be generated, but there is also potential for success to be achieved (see Coliandris, 2015). Because of this, considering the role of symbolism and the wider symbolic nature of responses is important in understanding their introduction and use. As outlined in chapter four, elements of drug policing, and policing more generally, have long been understood in relation to appearances (Innes, 2014; Loader, 1997). For a specific issue that has generated such intense attention, not only within law enforcement but also across political and public spheres (e.g. APPG, 2017), it would seem somewhat inevitable that the police would attempt to respond in ways that sent out significant external communicative signals (see Coomber et al., 2017). In addition to this, however, because of the ways in which these responses were formed and undertaken, the findings also suggest that these symbolic concerns and communications are also of relevance internally within the organisation.

The drive to establish and promote original ways of responding to this new problem can be considered a clear example of both these external and internal symbolic concerns. For senior criminal justice officials and politicians, bestowing officers

located in affected areas with a new 'bespoke' power in the form of the DDTRO, or encouraging them to pursue 'novel' prosecutions under the Modern Slavery Act (2015), not only serves to show the public how committed they are to countering some of the aspect of the 'newsy' topic of County Lines, but also communicates to officers on the ground that the problems it presents and the associated fears are being recognised and responded to. As detailed in chapter seven, the brief excitement and expectation that these tactics were initially met with demonstrates how their design and promotion aligned with the aforementioned understandings and fears surrounding this area. The DDTRO power tapped into the commercial nature of these groups and the 'business-model' orientation stressed in chapter six. By targeting the centrality of the 'brand' and the overall phone line methodology, this tactic represented an opportunity to severely disrupt these supply operations. Similarly, the promotion of Modern Slavery convictions tapped into the perceived 'monstrousness' (Hallsworth, 2013) of their gang culture, recounted in the 'gang talk' (Hallsworth and Young, 2008) present in chapter six. Because of the particular 'threat' these groups were argued to present to vulnerable populations, this tactic therefore represented an opportunity to treat the issue and those responsible as guilty of more than just drug supply and to send out a suitable message. However, the fact that both of these were quickly dismissed as being unusable or ineffective meant that they were ultimately a source of frustration and disappointment. While initially a cause for hope, a potential source of 'action' (Reiner, 2010), and a way of communicating their commitment and ability to respond to this new problem, they were soon considered by local officers as tools to be 'stage managed' towards those who had provided the power rather than used, internally inverting the symbolic process attached to them.

It is within this context that the reliance on more popular and familiar "bread and butter" (Dorn et al., 1992, p.135) drug policing activities can be situated. The use of 'crackdown operations' and local 'days of action' was underpinned by them being 'axiomatically' (Sackmann, 1991) understood as the appropriate response to crack and heroin markets (see Collison, 1995). But they were also understood as having the capacity to be adapted and applied to the specific context of County Lines. Being

the dominant actual and symbolic ways that they responded to the issue, it was therefore also these that officers relied on to deliver actual and symbolic outcomes. This helps to explain the observation, aligning with Coomber et al.'s (2017) analysis, that those ultimately affected were predominantly local populations, rather than the feared outsider 'gangsters' (Hallsworth, 2013). The drive to send out 'control signals' (Innes, 2014) through the 'spectacle' (Edelman, 1988) of policing and disrupt the local market meant that mass arrests were a vigorously pursued and celebrated achievement. But, because of the itinerant nature of County Lines, the local 'low hanging fruit' (Coomber et al., 2017) became the predominant targets. Inverting the classic public order policing dictum of 'winning while appearing to lose' (Reiner, 2010), local officers were instead seemingly losing while appearing to win. This therefore indicates a particular challenge of policing County Lines, but is also likely of relevance to responding to 'import' (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992) markets more generally.

In addition to adding further weight behind Coomber et al.'s (2017) analysis, these findings from within the vantage point of the police organisation also serve to empirically develop this perspective. In particular, further insight is provided into why these results occurred and the wider 'symbolic' ramifications of these forms of policing activity. As uncovered in chapter eight, arguably of significant importance to understanding their outcomes was some of the practicalities regarding how crackdowns were undertaken. Focusing strictly geographically by casting a net on one particular town at a time, the familiar aims outlined in chapter four of such operations attempting to be as disruptive to the local market as possible appeared to be a key driver of the resulting mass arrests of local populations (see Aitken et al., 2002). This was then exacerbated by the need to deliver results regarding an increasingly high-profile issue, while being strictly time and resource limited.

At a more micro level, for the localised 'days of action' concerns of geography also appeared relevant, with a somewhat crude reliance on drug market 'hot spots' (Rengert et al., 2005) contributing to a lack of focus on those they ultimately set out to target. Perhaps more importantly, however, the informal motivations behind these days in the form of anxieties of being perceived as a 'push over' and a desire

to assert their ability to maintain control of their 'turf', appeared to fuel the dominant gaze on locals, whether they be somewhat embroiled in County Lines or not. As indicated by some of the negative outcomes of the 'safeguarding' activities such as welfare checks and the use of 'cukooing letters', the overarching adversarial relationship between the police and users of drugs underpinned by the 'law on the books' (Marks et al. 2017), these populations often being 'police property' (Waddington, 1999b) and the ability for possession offences to provide tangible outcomes of these days (Bear, 2016), should also not be overlooked as fundamentally driving these consequences.

For both of these local responses to County Lines it could be concluded that there is a need for them to be more nuanced and targeted, focusing more specifically on the identified 'problem' (Goldstein, 1979) that necessitated them. Such approaches have been found to be effective at targeting more problematic dealers compared to those arrested via 'traditional' forms of policing (Kirby et al., 2010). Specifically, in this drug market policing context this could reduce the tendency for these activities - undertaken in response to the threat of outsiders – ultimately leading to the intensified criminalisation of local populations. In turn, this could also help to genuinely respond to vulnerabilities (Coliandris, 2015), or at least reduce them being exacerbated, while also beneficially placing enforcement attention on those considered most harmful (Bacon, 2016a). Relating back to the importance of symbolism, doing so also has the potential to send out more meaningful communicative signals (Innes, 2014). Arresting the most problematic dealers, could provide more legitimacy to claims of making their areas 'hostile' places to travel to and deal in, to the benefit of any associated deterrent effects (Kleiman, 2005). For local agencies receiving and interpreting these messages, the result of more targeted outcomes could also avoid some of the pessimistic perceptions reported in chapter seven regarding what can realistically be achieved in response to the problem (Foster, 2000).

9.4 Progress and challenges in the application of harm reduction principles

Just as the responses to County Lines has opened a window to explore and develop the perspective of 'symbolic policing' (Coomber et al., 2017), so too has it allowed for enquiry into the notion of applying harm reduction principles to drug market policing. While theoretical historical precedent is visible in this area (Caulkins, 2002; Curtis and Wendel, 2007; Dorn and South, 1990; Kleiman, 2005; Maher and Dixon, 1999), as Bacon (2016a p. 246) notes, this remains a "relatively new movement" that exists firmly in academic discourse. As politically charged and 'risky' as drug policy debates are (Stevens, 2011b), with the engrained 'drug war' logic continuing to permeate this area (Leishman and Wood, 2000), change can be considered as inevitably slow. This is the case even in the midst of an international 'quiet revolution' of drug policy reform (Eastwood et al., 2016). Notable, therefore, was the extent and positivity to which such a policing approach was informally discussed 'backstage' among officers. The very nature of County Lines, the understandings surrounding the phenomenon and previous experience of unintended drug market policing consequences (Kerr et al., 2005; Werb et al., 2011) appeared to have led to the considerations of such an approach to emerge organically among many officers. Speaking to the potential benefits of focusing specifically on noxious aspects of the market and its externalities, of primary concern for them were the harms associated with the supply methodology, rather than the supply itself (Caulkins, 2002). While again important to acknowledge that these perceptions are not without precedent or necessarily an overly radical departure from traditional goals (see Collison, 1995; Parker, 2006), this is perhaps illustrative of the evolving drug market context police are now typically working in compared to when Bacon (2016a) conducted his fieldwork. Based on informal officer perceptions and more formal goals, it would therefore appear appropriate to understand drug policing as organically moving towards embracing harm reduction goals.

At a practical level, while they also had some counterproductive impacts, the examples of success with regard to the use of cuckoo letters and the general attempts at engagement with local user populations demonstrates how policing can

be progressively adapted within its existing formal prohibition context to achieve more nuanced aims (Stevens, 2013). As with other recent developments such as facilitating drug testing at festivals (see Measham, 2019) and drug diversion schemes, such policing should be recognised for its capacity to reduce drug related harms within the existing prohibition context. However, in this thesis, it is the pursuit of the prioritisation process of who to target (Collison, 1995) detailed in chapter eight that presents as particularly intriguing with regard to the practical implications and the more theoretical concerns surrounding this perspective in the contexts of market harms. As a formal strategy, most notable is how it presents as a genuine way that drug market policing can move in such a direction, while being both externally and internally acceptable. It poses as a way of mitigating the apparent incompatibility of applying the 'pure' philosophy of harm reduction in the way it is promoted towards reducing the harms of drug use (Erickson, 1995), navigating the 'value neutral' problem outlined by Blaustein et al. (2017) with regard to reducing the harm caused by drug markets (see also Nadellman, 2004). Importantly, as suggested by the response from those working in other organisations, officers should also likely feel comfortable acknowledging their limitations and justifying the more 'selective', targeted and informal 'regulatory' approach (Bacon, 2016b) they seek to pursue, perhaps similar to how the focussed deterrence strategies discussed in chapter four have been promoted in other countries (Braga et al., 2018).

That noted, even as a somewhat pragmatic and modified form of policing in relation to harm reduction principles, aspects of this formalised prioritisation would appear problematic or difficult to achieve in practice. Illustrating the importance of having generated a greater insight into drug markets and the County Lines phenomenon in previous chapters, the findings in chapter eight suggest there to be particular challenges of operating in this way in response to this specific drug supply methodology. The difficulties of generating a clear understanding of who these 'out of town' dealers are would appear to be a particular challenge. This is compounded by the frequent use of different runners, the 'franchising' and switching of numbers between groups, and the generally agile nature of County Lines networks (Coomber and Moyle, 2007; Robinson et al., 2018; Whittaker et al., 2019). This could be

considered indicative of the extent to which this drug market policing perspective been dominantly proposed in relation to more 'local', urban markets (e.g. Curtis and Wendel, 2007; Maher and Dixon, 1999), but also how this poses as problematic in relation to those that can be considered as 'import' markets (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992). More predictable issues such as the ability and resources to research and assess each line sufficiently, and the capacity for decisions of who to be prioritised to be made objectively (see Loftus et al., 2015) are also of note. Ultimately, therefore, just as the emergence of County Lines would appear to have gone in some way to promote a move towards more harm reduction orientated drug market policing strategies, with the prioritisation process illustrating how these ideas might be genuinely applied in practice, so too does it raise new theoretical and practical challenges about effectively undertaking it.

9.5 'We can't arrest our way out of this': The role of social and drug policy

Looking beyond policing, even when highly resourced and with the most enlightened of goals and strategies, in isolation law enforcement is severely limited to what it can achieve to complex, 'wicked' social problems (Coliandris, 2015). As outlined throughout the thesis, this is particularly the case in the context of drug markets, where the formal demands of prohibition are clearly unachievable, but the surrounding political and moralistic rhetoric demands unequivocal commitment (Bacon, 2016b; Caulkins, 2002; Kleiman, 2006). With the findings and analysis of this thesis in mind, it is therefore worth considering the wider implications of effective responses to County Lines. This is not intended to be an exhaustive discussion. Rather, building on the insights provided by this thesis, it serves to indicate areas for future research and analysis. It can also be considered as something of a rebuttal to suggestions that wide-sweeping, intense policing and punitive criminal justice responses should be pursued (e.g. Centre for Social Justice, 2018). The role of both social and drug policy can be considered particularly worth consideration, both independently but also how they relate to policing and the field in which officers operate. For the purposes of the discussion, drawing on the 'push and pull' factors model provided by Morselli et al. (2011) serves as a useful guiding framework, not

least as it speaks to the itinerant nature of County Lines, but also the recognition of the fundamental limitations of prohibition and the adaptive capacity of drug markets.

With regard to social policy and political economy (see Reiner, 2007; Hall et al., 2008), it is worth considering why drug markets in inner cities are becoming 'saturated', with the resulting expansion of drug supply networks into provincial locales (Hobbs and Hales, 2010; Windle and Briggs, 2015). As highlighted in chapter two, high levels of deprivation combined with limited legitimate job opportunities appear to be increasingly propelling young people into illicit drug market participation (Densley and Stevens, 2015). Official figures of just how many lines there are illustrate this (NCA, 2018). It can therefore be contended that without addressing this intensifying 'social bulimia' (Young, 1999) and the creation of vast swathes of 'flawed consumers' (Bauman, 2007), large numbers of those seeking to profit from supply will almost inevitably keep being 'pushed' out to provincial areas.

Somewhat relatedly, while chapter two stressed the importance of recognising that 'systemic' violence (Goldstein, 1985) is not inevitable, there would also appear to be a risk that what can currently be generally considered provincial drug market 'externalities' (Caulkins, 2002), such as serious violence, the involvement of young people or exploitative forms of cuckooing, might become increasingly engrained as part of their general machinations (see Coomber, 2015; Robinson et al., 2018). Rather than being able to differentiate between less harmful dealers this may become an engrained part of local drug market culture (Curtis and Wendel, 2007), with cases such as the 'ideal line' documented in chapter eight an increasing rarity. If so, this poses significant challenges to the potential of pursuing even the most theoretically and practically robust police prioritisation strategy and applying harm reduction principles to these import markets.

In addition to inner cities, conditions of deprivation and inequality are also worth considering in relation to the areas where County Lines dealers are 'pulled' to (Morselli et al., 2011). While it may serve various interests and feed sensationalist 'gang talk' (Hallsworth and Young, 2008) to portray 'out of town' dealers as targeting peaceful, clean, provincial areas and making them 'impure' and 'dirty' (Douglas, 1966) there are of course significant pockets of poverty in affected rural, market and

coastal towns. Over recent years, corresponding to the emergence and intensification of the County Lines phenomenon, reductions in local council budgets and service provision has intensified this deprivation (Petrie et al., 2018). In the context of County Lines this is important as such conditions inevitably feed the supply model, the vulnerabilities of local populations that are exploited (Coliandris, 2015) and the markets they service. Even in its least harmful forms, no form of cuckooing is tolerable from a policing or wider community perspective (Spicer et al., 2019). To get rid of, or at least significantly reduce this and the wider market that County Lines dealers service therefore requires deep structural change that prevents locals from being vulnerable to be lured in and the return to a more embedded local drug market 'moral economy' (Wakeman, 2016). As those such as Currie (1993) have argued, effectively responding to drug markets and their issues requires fundamentally addressing the social roots of why actors populate them (see also Hall et al., 2008; Parker et al., 1988; Pearson, 1987; Seddon, 2006). This will always be far beyond the role or capability of the police.

In addition to social conditions, matters of drug policy are also worth consideration in the context of responding to County Lines. This is also not completely divorced from social policy. Stevens (2011b) argues those at the lowest ends of the socio-economic hierarchy experience a disproportionate amount of drug related harm, and this would appear to be firmly illustrated by the typical actors involved and affected by the County Lines phenomenon. Ambitious arguments will continue to be made for the transformative capacity for complete legal regulation (Transform, 2009; Woods 2018). Yet, as compelling as some of these may be, it is worth considering more pragmatic and potentially immediate responses in this area. Heroin assisted treatment provision (see Haasen et al., 2007) targeted at the most problematic local users poses as a potentially beneficial way of reducing what 'pulls' County Lines dealers to these provincial areas. Doing so could significantly reduce the potential local customer base, as well as make these populations less vulnerable to cuckooing or becoming embroiled in activities such as running. As hostile an environment as local police may symbolically seek to make their towns to 'out of town' dealers

(Coomber and Moyle, 2018), a reduced and less complicit clientele is likely to pose as making their areas a far less attractive destination.

The decriminalisation of drug possession offences also poses as a valuable tool in responding to and reducing the harms of County Lines experienced by local populations. From a harm reduction perspective, the case not to criminalise user populations for these offences is arguably clear, as one of the principal ways that the police can reduce harm is to cease imposing punishment on those that use drugs (see Stevens, 2013). While by engaging in running or more mutualistic forms of cuckooing some of these individuals may be technically culpable for some supply related offences (Moyle, forthcoming; Spicer et al., 2019), as Coomber and Moyle (2015) have argued, it is not appropriate to view user dealers as drug dealers 'proper'. Attempts to avoid the criminalisation of these populations, especially given the evidence presented by law enforcement publications themselves that many are threatened into drug running or coerced into having their homes appropriated by these groups (e.g. NCA 2016), can therefore be justified. In addition, such a shift in policy would also appear to offer greater opportunities for engagement and safeguarding between officers and local user populations. Observations during fieldwork suggested this was already often possible. Removing the structure of criminal sanctions could help further promote this, as well as avoid some of the more negative, counterproductive outcomes that these can lead to. Just as early warning signs are often used in the context of drug use (see Hando et al., 1998), there would appear significant potential for such signs to be used in the context of markets, including, for example, the presence of 'parasitic' forms of cuckooing (Spicer et al., 2019). Greater engagement between officers and local user populations without the looming fear of criminalisation would be one way of achieving this.

It would appear clear, therefore, that in the context of this thesis and its arguments, the recognition of the role of both social and drug policy in relation to responding to County Lines is worthy of reflection. Their influence can place significant structural restraints and hurdles on what the police can achieve but also, with suitable reform, suggest how the policing of this area can be more successful. In the face of drug market problems, the police do not simply have a binary choice of either demanding

more resources and cracking down harder on offenders, or of giving up the 'drug war' and completely embracing legalisation. Instead they can "redefine the issue as a social problem linked to or caused by structural features such as poverty, unemployment, etc." (Murji, 1998a, p. 83). By typically only dealing with the consequences rather than the causes, as many of the officers themselves were keen to stress, the police should not be expected to solve the problem of County Lines on their own. When they attempt to they arguably set themselves up to fail, placing undue emphasis on symbolic outcomes and being critiqued when these are antithetical to wider harm reduction concerns (Coomber et al. 2017). But there is still an important and potentially beneficial role for them. When high level policing activities and arrests are undertaken, rather than considering this a suitable end point and cause for celebration, it may be more productive to consider this as the start of a bigger process. For example, if supply disruption is achieved in a town, even if for just a short period of time, then this may offer an invaluable window to promote drug service engagement and treatment provision. Similarly, if successful arrests are made of commercial 'out of town' dealers, consideration could be given to the potential ramifications of subsequently moving on to pursue and remove less harmful local dealers. While far from a panacea, such strategies, alongside the types of aforementioned policy reforms, pose as an effective response to the very real problem of County Lines in their area. Policing can go beyond the 'sisyphean task' (Curtis and Wendel, 2007) of attempting to eliminate drug markets, to one where comparably modest but genuine achievements in the form of reducing their harms can be achieved.

9.6 Knowledge contributions, limitations and 'where next?' for County Lines

As this concluding chapter illustrates, this thesis makes a number of contributions to existing knowledge. Its findings and analysis provides an important addition to the growing body of literature on the issue of County Lines (see Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Robinson et al., 2018; Whittaker et al., 2019; Windle and Briggs, 2015), and the impact on the areas where this outreach practice is now often firmly embedded in particular. It also develops the concept of an 'import' market, outlining how these

can function in a contemporary context and the types of fear and understandings it might generate. More prominently, however, having negotiated privileged access, detailed empirical insights into the local policing responses to this drug market phenomenon are provided. Such methodological endeavours are rare in themselves (Bacon, 2016a; Collison, 1995). Genuinely exploratory and prolonged ethnographic enquiries are now often a distinct luxury in the current research landscape. But doing so within this particular context brings to light some of the realities and experiences of policing this particularly high-profile drug supply issue, highlighting the enduring importance of such work. Fundamentally, therefore, it provides rare insight into what the police are 'actually doing' (Reiner, 2010).

At a theoretical level, by drawing on the two contemporary perspectives of 'symbolic policing' (Coomber et al., 2017) and the application of harm reduction principles (Bacon, 2016a) greater sophistication and insight are provided to the findings. Drawing on its rich empirical foundation, the thesis also specifically serves to progress these two areas, with significant theoretical development made. By doing so, the responses to County Lines can be situated within a wider drug policing context, providing greater critical understanding to why and how they were undertaken. Similar to how the work of both Bacon (2016a) and Coomber et al. (2017) were adopted and developed in this project, this also leaves the door open for future drug policing research and analysis to situate itself, even if it is in a different drug market context than that of County Lines.

As with all research, however, there are limitations to the study reported on in this thesis. It is important to recognise that the insights on County Lines and the actors involved are derived from the range of police centric data gathered during the research. This is inevitably limited and partial. As Hobbs (2013, p.4) states, "the view from the backseat of a police car tends to be the back of a police officer's head". Taking this both figuratively and literally, just as with data gleaned on drug markets and their actors from other sources (Coomber, 2004), it is therefore important to recognise the potential weaknesses of conducting analysis on this area based predominantly on law enforcement data and related experiences (see Windle and Silke, 2018). Not speaking to 'active' offenders in detail is inevitably a limitation of

what is reported here. Doing so has been stressed as important in providing a fuller picture of illicit market places and their actors (Jacques and Bonomo, 2017). Understandings of County Lines, but also the effect of police responses on market actors, would benefit from such a research endeavour.

During the fieldwork that was undertaken, while I achieved significant levels of access, there was also some aspects that my embedded position did not stretch to. Greater observations of crackdown operations would have served to further strengthen my analysis of them, their outcomes and their symbolic qualities. The enduring challenge of negotiating access to officers engaging in test purchasing is also of note. While unsurmountable access barriers are unsurprising given its nature and the experience of other attempts (e.g. Bacon, 2016a), because of their important role, further insight into this would have undoubtedly also been of great value. As detailed in the opening chapter, it is also worth reflecting on the implications of the 'newsy' nature of the topic under focus (Wacquant, 2008) and the exploratory approach undertaken. Researchers removing themselves from the field is commonly reported as a challenging experience, often done somewhat reluctantly (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Coming to the end of this project, it soon became clear there was not going to be a 'right' time to remove myself and conclude data collection. Upon doing so, new developments occurred and opportunities to explore further issues had to be passed on. In some ways this could be considered illustrative of successfully undertaking a truly exploratory approach, but a sense of the story not being complete remains.

Following this, there are a number of areas that can be identified as ripe for further research and investigation. Such conclusions are de rigueur, but this is particularly the case in this context where a highly exploratory approach was adopted and the topic is one of such current intense scrutiny and attention. With regard to County Lines itself, there is clearly a need for greater empirical and critical attention. As previously noted, future work with active offenders is needed to build on existing insights (Robinson et al., 2018; Whittaker et al., 2019; Windle and Briggs, 2015), as well as to challenge dominant perceptions and understandings. In particular, adopting a drug market perspective rather than overly focusing on issues such as

youth or 'gang' involvement, future research could look at developing a more nuanced, socialised view of County Lines groups and their actors (Dwyer and Moore, 2010), including how they confirms or challenge some of the enduring concerns outlined in chapter two such as the levels of the market (Coomber and Moyle, 2018).

Longer term tracking of both the supply model's intensification, its enduring effect on local drug markets, and the associated police responses is also of importance. Questions of whether it will become relatively normalised or if there is success in returning 'import' markets to becoming more 'local' (Reuter and MacCoun, 1992) are of particular interest. Given the sweeping up of 'low hanging fruit' reported in both this thesis and Coomber et al., (2017), so too are the implications of significant numbers of local populations being imprisoned and ultimately returning to the locale. Finally, given the prevalence of 'gang talk' (Hallsworth and Young, 2008; Hallsworth, 2013), 'pusher myths' (Coomber, 2006) and more general forms of scapegoating of this high-profile area, critical analysis of the topic and its representations would also appear to be of value. In turn this may serve to focus attentions on some of the structural drivers of the phenomenon (Stevens and Densley, 2015). As Wacquant (2008, p.282) notes, "the task of social science is not to surf the wave of current events but to bring to light the durable and invisible mechanisms that produce them". Whether criminology is up to that task as a discipline will remain to be seen.

Specifically with regard to policing, it will be of note to track the use (or lack thereof) of some of the more novel, bespoke tactics proposed to counter the threat of County Lines. If DDTROs do become a regularly used tactic or if Modern Slavery convictions become more frequent for County Lines offenders then one would expect something to have significantly changed. They may have become more fit for purpose or easier to use. Alternatively, perceptions of their worth among officers may have changed. If, however, as the findings of this thesis would suggest is the more likely scenario and they remain unpopular underused tools, then the responses by those who originally provided or promoted them are of interest. How and if new tactics emerge prove particularly compelling. Indeed, as could be expected on such a high-profile issue, from the end of the fieldwork to the writing of the thesis, other prominent

policing strategies have been constructed and promoted. The establishment of the national 'County Lines Co-ordination Centre' and what implications might come from this poses as particularly noteworthy.

In relation to some of the other findings of this thesis, it would inevitably be of note to explore the implications of the prioritisation strategy, how well it functions in practice and the extent to which it can be considered a move towards a drug market policing approach conforming to harm reduction principles (Bacon, 2016a). It is notable that in the NCA's most recent 'Annual Plan' they state that they will seek to "prioritise and coordinate action against the most significant perpetrators" in relation to County Lines (NCA, 2019, p.13). This illustrates the apparent intention for this to be applied more widely. Indeed, the notion of applying harm reduction principles is an area that will likely be of further interest, especially in the face of potential drug policy reform, and still requires further theoretical development (Bacon, 2016a; Blaustein et al., 2017). In accordance with County Lines remaining such a high-profile policing and political issue, the continued role of the symbolic qualities of such policing activity in this area also poses as worthy of further monitoring and scrutiny. In fact, in an attempt to bring these two strands together, further research could potentially explore how these two perspectives may interplay. It would be tempting to place the notion of symbolic policing in opposition to applying harm reduction principles. The former could be considered to exemplify some of the worst aspects of this area of policing, while the latter proclaims to pave the way for more nuanced, realistic and arguably more beneficial forms of policing. Yet a level of symbolism and external communication for drug market policing is inevitably important, as well as expected (Innes, 2014). Well publicised arrests of the most harmful dealers could, for example, help keep others and the general state of the market in check. Understanding this potential in greater detail poses as developing more realistic and productive conceptions of how drug policing may be reformed and operate within its existing structures.

9.7 Conclusion

Faced with the rise of the County Lines phenomenon and limited academic research on the subject, this thesis has explored its emergence and the local responses to it in affected provincial areas. It provides a range of original empirical findings and analysis which bring to light the initial understandings of this high-profile drug market development among police officers and how this was then translated into practice. Both novel tactics and familiar approaches were levelled at the 'changing shape' (Coomber and Moyle, 2018) of local heroin and crack supply, the threat of these dangerous outsiders, the intensifying prevalence of 'import' markets in these provincial locales, and the associated elements of the supply methodology deemed particularly noxious. Much of this activity could, however, be considered as symbolic (Coomber et al., 2017), attempting to send out prominent messages but failing to reduce these harms. That noted, change in this area was certainly detectable. Despite challenges, a gradual organic shift towards applying harm reduction principles (Bacon, 2016a) was evident. How the phenomenon and the responses to it develop will remain to be seen and will be of interest not just within academia but beyond. Ultimately, while signs would suggest of progressive and pragmatic responses being enacted, as with past drug market issues, without structural and policy change the extent to which the police can mould these markets back to a less harmful 'local' shape may be limited.

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