

‘That’s their brand, their business’: how police officers are interpreting County Lines

Jack Spicer

Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences University of the West of England Bristol, UK, BS16 1QY

Jack.Spicer@uwe.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

A recent development in drug markets across England and Wales garnering increased attention is the phenomenon of ‘County Lines’. This involves drug supply groups migrating from major cities to smaller towns, and has become associated with a range of harms including violence and the exploitation of vulnerable populations. Drawing on interviews with police officers of various ranks tasked with responding to County Lines, this article explores how they are interpreting this emergent phenomenon. A framework of profit maximisation was constructed by all of the participants, and was used as a way to understand and explain some of the key characteristics and activities associated with County Lines groups. Congruent with this, participants also stressed these group’s similarities to legitimate business and how they adopted conventional business strategies such as marketing. The article concludes by discussing the utility of this profit maximisation framework, how it relates to police responses and areas worthy of further research.

Keywords: County Lines; drug policing; drug markets; profit maximisation

Introduction

A recent development in drug markets across England and Wales garnering increased attention is the migration of drug selling groups from major supply hubs to provincial satellite areas (Coomber and Moyle 2017). Commonly referred to as ‘County Lines’, these groups

have been expanding their crack cocaine and heroin selling operations from major cities to coastal, rural and market towns. As this phenomenon poses significant and novel challenges for the police, it is important to explore how the groups and their conduct is being interpreted by officers, and how this relates to how they are responded to.

Though the most common origin of these groups is London, they have also been reported as originating from other cities such as Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool (NCA 2017). The smaller host towns they migrate to are considered attractive due to the ample supply of accessible customers in the form of local drug users, and the comparatively less challenging competition from local drug dealers. Perceived increased anonymity has also been suggested as being attractive given that members of these groups may not be known or recognised by local police forces (NCA 2015). It has been argued that the cause of this phenomenon is the saturation of crack cocaine and heroin markets in major cities (Windle and Briggs 2015a). In short, there are increasingly more individuals seeking to enter the drug market in these areas as dealers, but less people to sell to. This would appear a credible explanation given recent trends of an ageing heroin using population, and marginalised inner city youths increasingly associating themselves with the ‘gang’ lifestyle, of which drug dealing is a major component (Densley and Stevens 2015). Indeed, to some the phenomenon will likely come as little surprise. Almost a decade ago Hales and Hobbs (2010) reported that a London borough drug market was close to saturation and that the dealers operating in the area were becoming more mobile.

It is important to note that drug dealers being outwardly mobile and migrating to other areas is not a wholly novel phenomenon in itself. Research has documented drug suppliers operating across multiple force areas, and how supply routes involve the transportation of drugs from major urban hubs to smaller towns (Dorn *et al.* 1992). Some may therefore be suspicious that the identification of County Lines as a problem is a product of

‘chronocentrism’ (Rock 2005), especially given that the chief documenter of the phenomenon, the National Crime Agency (NCA), is a relatively young organisation. Indeed, as those such as Bacchi (2009) have stressed, it is important to critically analyse the process of ‘problematization’ and how problems are represented. However, previously documented drug supply mobility has been typically associated with wholesale dealers operating in the middle-market (Pearson and Hobbs 2001). What is novel about the County Lines phenomenon is that it involves setting up retail operations in host areas. Thus, it would appear that end users located in these areas are now increasingly buying from and being exposed to non-local dealers (Coomber and Moyle 2017).

As has been reported by numerous police forces across England and Wales, a primary concern associated with the emergence of County Lines has been the rise of serious violence, often involving firearms, knives or other weapons, in the areas where they have migrated to (NCA 2017). This is often considered to occur due to competition within the drug markets, as these groups aim to monopolise and dominate local drug supply. Thus, levels of violence have been reported as increasing in areas where County Lines groups are establishing themselves or seeking to assert a dominant presence in a new locality through aggression and intimidation (NCA 2016). Another major concern related to County Lines is the victimisation and exploitation of vulnerable local populations and, in particular, problem drug users. A major way in which this occurs is ‘cuckooing’, a process whereby these migratory dealers target vulnerable local residents and gain access to their homes by befriending or offering them incentives such as cheap drugs (Moyle, forthcoming). Their homes are then appropriated by the County Lines groups and used as bases from which they reside and conduct their operations. In order to ensure compliance, it has been reported that dealers will often threaten cuckooed residents with violence or charge them with repaying drug related debt (Butera 2013).

The dominant law enforcement narrative surrounding cuckooing has framed it as an inherently exploitative and pernicious practice. Coomber and Moyle (2017), however, stress that it is actually a far more varied model. While some cases do involve the clear victimisation of a vulnerable person, others are more nuanced, with local residents not being overtly coerced or exposed to high levels of harm. Cuckooing has also been typically depicted as a rather novel tactic. Yet on closer inspection this would again appear to be a moot point. There is, for example, evidence from ethnographic studies documenting the realities of crack houses that has described similar practices of vulnerable residents having their homes taken over by dealers (see, for example, Briggs 2010). Thus, while the emergence of County Lines poses novel and significant challenges for the police, it would be unwise to depict the activities of those involved as being wholly without precedent.

The Structure of County Lines Groups

The County Lines supply model is considered relatively well organised. It typically consists of more established ‘elders’ recruiting younger, often teenage, associates and sending them out to lesser urban areas, while they manage a dedicated phone line from their home city (Windle and Briggs 2015a). Buyers use this phone number to place orders then those in possession of the line relay the orders back to those dealers residing in the satellite town. In an attempt to provide insight into the structure of County Lines groups, Coomber and Moyle (2017) usefully explicate three core roles occupied by individuals involved in this form of supply that they suggest facilitate their business model. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these roles and functions appear to conform to the enduring observation of drug supply groups being organised in a recognisably, although not necessarily strictly, hierarchical social structure (Coomber 2015, Matrix Knowledge Group 2007, May and Hough 2004, Windle and Briggs 2015b).

Operating at the higher end of the hierarchy, and commanding respect and deference from those lower down, are those described as ‘Top Boys’ (Coomber and Moyle 2017). These individuals tend to remain in their native cities and manage the phone line at the supply end, where orders are placed. While this distance likely protects them from law enforcement attention, it is suggested that they often still have an active role in monitoring or even micromanaging both the enterprise, and day-to-day performance of their ‘workers’, from afar (ibid.). The second core role is performed by those described as ‘Sitters’ (ibid.). These individuals are lower ranking members of the organisation, typically of young age, and will be resident in the host towns. Taking their orders from the ‘Top Boys’, they engage in the physical movement of drugs and manage their distribution in the ‘colonised’ community. The third key role, particularly familiar in the drug market literature, is that of ‘Runner’. These individuals are actively involved in the street level face-to-face drug dealing to the end user. Runners are often very young, and recruited from the group’s native city (APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults 2017, Windle and Briggs 2015a). Storrod and Densley (2017) uncovered their presence on social media, identifying the use of hashtags such as ‘#goingcnt’ and ‘#Backondamotorway’ accompanied by images of money supposedly generated by being a runner for a County Lines group. Thus, it would appear that these individuals are attracted by the potential to make money expeditiously (Windle and Briggs 2015a). However, it is not exclusively young people who have the role of runner in a County Lines operation. It can also be undertaken by, or forced upon, a member of the local drug using population of the colonised towns (Coomber and Moyle 2017). Regardless of who adopts this role, in essence the County Lines model represents an organised hierarchical organisational structure that thrives on the exploitation of the vulnerable, and serves to distance the more powerful key perpetrators and garner them protection from the law (Coliandris 2015).

Law enforcement response

Little research exploring the County Lines phenomenon is available due to its recent emergence. Important investigative journalism documenting the practice has been undertaken by Max Daly (see, for example, Daly 2017), but most information has been collated and disseminated by the NCA. Thus it is from their official publications that current academic and practitioner understandings have been predominantly formed. In 2015 the NCA first acknowledged 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). They reported that County Lines activities were manifesting across seven police force regions. In a more detailed follow-up national briefing, the NCA (2016) reported that 31 police forces were experiencing such dealing practices. In their most recent report, 38 forces reported County Lines activity, with a ‘conservative estimate’ (NCA 2017, p.8) of at least 720 different groups currently operating nationwide. Its prevalence and the associated range of serious harms has now made it a key priority for numerous police forces. Indeed, the phenomenon and the desire to respond to it robustly was also alluded to within the Government’s latest drug strategy (HM Government 2017).

A perhaps predictable response by local police forces to this emergent phenomenon has been observed in recent media statements, where they have sought to stress how they will not tolerate outsiders coming to their towns to deal drugs, and that their local populations and indeed them as a police force should not be perceived as ‘soft targets’ (see, for example, News.Met 2017). More practically, frequent high profile crackdown operations have been undertaken across numerous police force areas. Centred on highly organised, intelligence led strike days, these operations have sought the mass arrest of suspected County Lines dealers. However, drawing on concepts derived by Innes (2014) and Edelman (1985), Coomber *et al.* (2017) have been highly critical of such strategies and their outcomes, characterising them as

‘symbolic’ policing and arguing that they are typically ineffective and antithetical to wider law enforcement and public health aims. In particular, they suggest that these crackdown operations, supplemented by tactics such as test purchases, typically only serve to sweep up the low hanging fruit of highly visible, low level, local user-dealers. Thus, in practice the focus of these crackdowns are on individuals who are responsible for minimal levels of harm and who it may not even be appropriate to consider as ‘proper’ dealers (Moyle and Coomber 2017). In addition, it is argued that sweeping up these dealers may also ‘repeal the protective effects of a dominant low-level indigenous dealing population’ (Coomber *et al.* 2017, p.12). Thus, responding in this way may paradoxically leave greater opportunities for predatory, violent and more commercially orientated dealers to move in and exploit. Inverting the classic dictum of ‘winning while appearing to lose’ (Reiner 2010), this form of symbolic policing could perhaps instead be regarded as ‘losing while appearing to win’.

Other law enforcement strategies that have emerged in response to County Lines has been to encourage police officers to charge such offenders under the Modern Slavery Act 2015. The recently retired head of Drugs Threat and Intelligence for the NCA, Tony Saggars, promoted this as a valuable way of tackling County Lines and the associated exploitation of vulnerable individuals. He also suggested that such convictions would attach stigma to County Lines offenders, rather than the traditional ‘badge of honour’ associated with drug dealing (Swindon Advertiser 2017). A further, perhaps more strategic response has been to provide police forces with greater powers to shut down mobile phone lines used for drug dealing. Granted as part of the Digital Economy Act (2017), these powers are scheduled to be rolled out to forces in early 2018. The Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, argued that this, ‘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). How effective these, and other, responses will be, how they are used in practice and the

inevitable response that they engender from County Lines groups remains to be seen. But as ethnographic studies have highlighted, it is often officer's interpretations that is the principal guide of how police will respond to drug markets on the ground (Bacon 2016a, Collison 1995). Indeed, this then stresses the importance of the enduring aim of much police research which seeks to understand the actions and decisions of officers beyond formal rules and procedures (Ericson 2007). Thus, in order to appreciate how and why the police are responding to County Lines in the ways that they are, and how the phenomenon is being constructed, it is necessary to elucidate their understandings of it. In an attempt to fill this knowledge gap, this paper will, after outlining the research methodology, discuss how the phenomenon of County Lines is being interpreted by police officers.

Method

This paper draws on interviews conducted during the summer of 2017 with police officers located in a force area of Southern England experiencing the emergence of County Lines activity. The study forms part of a wider research project into the emergence of County Lines and served as an initial exploration into this under-researched area. A key research aim was to understand how County Lines was being interpreted and responded to by the police. Given the exploratory nature of the study, a highly inductive analytic approach was adopted. Drawing on the methodological tradition of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was considered appropriate due to it being particularly well suited to researching emergent and under-researched phenomena (Birk and Mills 2015). The interview schedule and the specific questions asked were left broad and open ended, with the intention that this would allow participants to freely guide their responses. This approach helped facilitate the exploratory nature of the study and also ensured that any preconceived ideas gleaned from the extant

literature - academic or otherwise; that was available at the time, did not unduly influence the focus and direction of the interviews. Ultimately, as is consistent with grounded theory methodology, it was intended that the findings would provide valuable insight in relation to the research aims and prove theoretically sensitising to areas worthy of further exploration in subsequent fieldwork (Charmaz 2014).

Overall, ten one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted lasting between forty five and ninety five minutes. The ranks of the participants, who were all based in the same force area, ranged from Police Constable to Detective Inspector. Crucially, all of the officers interviewed had been specifically tasked with working on the issue of County Lines, and had significant recent experience with numerous related cases. While they did engage in other policing tasks as part of their day-to-day workload, responding to County Lines was their primary concern. Indeed, at the time of the interviews, it had recently been made one of their force's top priorities. Access was obtained via initial contact with a Detective Inspector who then introduced the researcher to his three other detective colleagues who made up 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 in order to glean the perspectives of those undertaking different tasks and with different experiences of the phenomenon. Contact was therefore made with a Police Sergeant who had been tasked with responding to County Lines. He subsequently introduced the researcher to five other uniformed colleagues who were heavily involved in County Lines cases. Thus, although a small sample, the participants of this study comprised of the officers who, at the time of the interviews, had been specifically tasked by their force to work on the issue. One other uniformed officer with these responsibilities, and therefore suitable to be sampled, was unable to participate.

The study received ethical approval from The University of the West of England's research ethics committee. As a requirement when negotiating access, it was agreed that the officers and their force would remain anonymised in any published work. All names and locations mentioned in this article have therefore been given non-identifiable pseudonyms. Using the computer software package 'NVivo 11', an initial phase of open coding was undertaken with all the interview transcripts before a second phase of focused coding, allowing for the generation of more conceptual and abstract codes (Charmaz 2014). From this analysis, a core conceptual category of profit maximisation emerged, upon which this paper is based.

Findings & Discussion

Profit maximisation: the business of County Lines

A dominant narrative expressed by all of the participants was that County Lines groups operated very similarly to a legitimate business. The dominant, if not sole, motivator behind the emergence of these groups and those participating within them was the desire to generate profit. The prevalence of this narrative and the way it was consistently drawn upon as an explanatory framework suggested the participants considered this as an appropriate and productive way to interpret the issue. Thus, it was through this lens of a County Lines group being, or at least resembling, a business that the participants sought to understand and explain some of the key defining features of County Lines activity.

An example of applying this profit maximisation framework as an explanatory device was the migratory process of County Lines groups. The decision to deal in smaller rural, market or coastal towns was viewed as being the result of a considered choice by these groups of where they believed they would have the best chance of being able to infiltrate and take over local drug markets, with least resistance from established local dealers. Despite

other smaller cities likely having a larger potential customer base, participants suggested that County Lines groups judged drug markets in smaller towns to be easier to take over and therefore riper for profit. Thus, in a manner 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 main source of supply. In particular, participants believed this decision was influenced by the likely response their presence would engender from local dealers and, more specifically, these local dealer's propensity for violence.

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. (Mohammed, PC)

Another notable example of explaining County Lines characteristics using the framework of profit maximisation was their exclusive choice of heroin and crack cocaine as substances to deal. While some participants acknowledged the notion that the markets for these drugs had become saturated in their origin cities, it was believed that heroin and crack cocaine were specifically chosen because of their convenient physical form. Being in powder or rock form meant that they could be transported easily in relatively large amounts. This was deemed clearly beneficial for the County Lines model which inherently involves the transportation of drugs from one area to another but, more specifically, often involves young people transporting drugs on their own by train or other forms of public transport (NCA 2016). By

contrast, to transport a substance like cannabis in this manner was considered practically and financially unfeasible.

The choice of heroin and crack cocaine was also considered to be related to the perceived vulnerability associated with users of these substances. In this regard, County Lines dealers were viewed as making an informed judgement to deal in these drugs as they had a more complicit and dependable clientele, allowing for a more robust and efficient business model. In particular, officers suggested that dealing in these specific drugs afforded County Lines groups greater exposure to more vulnerable, problematic users who were socially excluded, lacking in social capital and unwilling to report victimisation to the police. These individuals would thus be prime candidates for cuckooing, considered by the participants to be 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.

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. (Clive, DI)

It is perhaps unsurprising that participants sought to understand this form of drug supply as being a product of the group's strong desire for financial gain. Previous research has found similar interpretations of those involved in drug supply. In his ethnographic study of detectives, Mathew Bacon (2016a) noted that they tended to view the dealers they targeted as 'business criminals' (p.220). However, as increasingly recognised concepts such as social supply (Coomber and Moyle 2014), and heroin's moral economy (Wakeman 2016) have highlighted, much heroin and crack dealing practices are not predicated solely on the desire to generate significant profit. Notably, this is often particularly the case in drug markets

operating outside of major urban conurbations (Coomber 2015). Thus, it might be suspected that due to participants being based in lesser urban areas and less exposed to highly structured and organised forms of drug supply, the influx of more commercial ‘outsider’ dealers served to instigate this fervent emphasis on profit maximisation. Indeed, as was indicated throughout many of the interviews, participants had previously interpreted the less organised and commercial local suppliers in a manner analogous to rational choice models (see Cornish and Clark 1986). It would seem inevitable, therefore, that when faced with the emergence of County Lines groups, participants would understand and explain their key features as calculated choices grounded in the desire to be able to perform their business model efficiently and maximise their potential for profit.

Marketing and the value of the brand

This overarching framework of profit maximisation also fed into the participant’s explanations of some of the specific County Lines behaviour they had been exposed to during their involvement with relevant cases. Comparisons between County Lines groups and legitimate commerce were frequently made by participants, with regular allusions to how they imitated conventional, well established business practices. Strikingly, when describing the activities of these groups, participants consistently drew upon an array of traditional business concepts and metaphors.

As previously outlined, a key feature of how County Lines groups operate is the use of a specific phone number that becomes their distinct brand (NCA 2017). Being integral to their business model, it was noted that these phone lines, and the associated brand, were guarded vehemently by County Lines groups:

There’s a massive reluctance for County Lines to change numbers. That’s their brand, their business. (Zoe, DS)

Participants suggested that this use of branding allowed dealers to advertise their business to potential customers and to develop a reputation; gradually they would seek to achieve brand recognition. Drawing on intelligence received from an ongoing case, several participants described how – when a County Lines group moved into a new area – they would hand out slips of paper with their brand name and phone number to the local drug using population. This, it was noted, was not dissimilar to the conventional use of business cards or flyers. Local users would then order their drugs by phone, and collect them at an agreed location stating the name of the brand to the runner. Adhering to this procedure was viewed as not only made the buying process smoother but also being a further source of protection from law enforcement tactics such as test purchases.

Despite their reputation for violence, and echoing the findings of Coomber and Moyle (2017), many participants stated that County Lines groups were popular among the local drug using population due to the superior quality of drugs on sale, combined with the reliability of their runners to deliver quickly and at all times of day and night. Given this, brand recognition was argued to be achieved rapidly, with County Lines groups becoming well established in the local neighbourhoods in a relatively short time period. Any competition from local dealers, if they had not already been scared off by intimidation or acts of violence, was thus seen to be quickly undermined due to County Lines operating in a more professional and organised manner. Making comparisons with legitimate business as a way of explaining this process, one detective used a metaphor 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. (Clive, DI)

Participants talked of 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. This included offering cheap prices to new customers and incentivising them to spread the word among other users. Again, this was presented as evidence of how in a relatively short amount of time, and aided by their adoption of conventional marketing tactics, County Lines groups were able to dominate a local drug market.

Analogies between drug dealers and legitimate business have been made by numerous drug market researchers (Adler 1985, Pearson and Hobbs 2001, Ruggiero and South 1995). Indeed, it should be noted that branding is nothing new in drug dealing. In his influential paper, Goldstein (1985) reported how this was commonly used in the New York crack cocaine markets of the early 1980s and how it contributed to incidents of 'systemic' violence. What, though, is more novel is the adoption of practices more analogous to notions of franchising. Notably, several of the detectives stated how they had recently become aware of the practice of County Lines groups 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. (Clive DI)

In addition to this it was suspected that many of these groups, if leaving a host town due to fear of law enforcement detection, would 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. Illustrating this, one detective reached into a pile of paper work on his desk and showed 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 occurs in the legitimate business world are evident. Thus, not only are

County Lines groups financially benefiting from the drug supply itself but, again relating back to the notion of profit maximisation, they would appear to be actively seeking other ways in which they can profit from the industry more broadly.

Participants also 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". (Sally, PC)

The implication, therefore, was that County Lines groups 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 notion is an intriguing one, and seemingly something that has rarely been observed or discussed in the broader drug market literature. However, it would be erroneous to state that this type of conduct is not wholly without precedent. Zaitch (2005), for example, documented how various migratory dealing groups operating at the same time across Amsterdam peacefully coexisted, and recognised the mutually beneficial reasons of doing so. Just how common and organised such behaviour is with regard to County Lines remains to be seen. But, 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 as to why crackdown operations, using tactics such as test purchases, tend to only pick up the most visible and low level local user dealers, and fail to take out the more commercial and organised (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 rather novel drug market behaviour, they are also further demonstrative of how prominent the notion of profit maximisation was in how participants sought to understand and explain their

behaviour. The extent that participants 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 (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 participants believed they, and the police as an organisation more broadly, should and could respond to them. In particular, participants 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. Thus, while not just viewing them as characteristic of these groups, it was this resemblance to legitimate business that was regarded as the chief way in which they could disrupt them. Notably, the new powers being afforded to them enabling them to shut down specific phone lines appears to fit very neatly into this. Indeed, one may suspect that these were granted specifically in response to police narratives similar to those displayed by the participants of this study.

The threat of County Lines: child exploitation and violence

While interpreting County Lines groups through this profit maximisation lens allowed officers to understand and explain some of their specific dealing practices, it was also used to provide an understanding of some of their other now well recognised and harmful characteristics. An example of this included the involvement of young people, something which has made County Lines become viewed as an especially pernicious drug supply model (see, APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults 2017). Again, firmly rooted in the notion of profit maximisation, the recruitment of young people as runners was widely interpreted as being a way for County Lines ‘elders’, to reduce the risk of being caught themselves and to be able to pay those working for them minimal sums of money. Participants discussed their experiences of talking with some of the young runners they had

arrested, and how it often became apparent that they had been groomed into becoming involved or entrapped 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. (Tina, DS)

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 innocent. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the 'back and white' world outlook commonly attributed to police culture (Reiner 2010), these stereotypical notions were often present during interviews, with County Lines dealers rendered as a threat to vulnerable people and otherwise law abiding communities. Notably, several participants 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." – Sally (PC)

It was striking that it was this specific act of putting a young runner in a 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 emphasised in drug warrior discourse (Coomber 2006). Indeed, the wearing of the school uniform underlines just how young those engaging in dealing are, and the perceived risk that these outsider drug dealing groups may then pose to local schoolchildren. 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 illustrates just how far they are prepared to go in order to facilitate their drug dealing operations and profit maximisation goals. In this sense, the pusher myths (ibid.) and concept of profit maximisation reinforced one another.

Also evocative of another core feature of Coomber's (2006) 'pusher myths', it was common, especially during the early stages of the interviews, for participants to stress how County Lines groups were comprised of highly dangerous, 'evil' individuals 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. Thus, 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 participants also engaged in forms of gang talk (Hallsworth 2013, Hallsworth and Young 2008), with its use in connection with drug supply represented as being a product of the supposed emergence of highly organised gangs in major British cities, similar in nature to those 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. (Simon, DS)

Despite this, however, when probing into some of these specific violent incidents in more detail, slightly altered, more nuanced stories were often revealed. Rather than violence being spectacular acts of expressive behaviour, it instead appeared to be almost exclusively deployed by County Lines dealers for instrumental purposes. Thus, 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, again, profit maximisation. Most commonly, acts of County Lines violence were seen to be related to drug debts. 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. (Mohammed, PC)

Another 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. Again, 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' groups. However, as many of the participants went on to reveal, this was typically a short term occurrence, used instrumentally by County Lines groups to intimidate, and ensure compliance from local dealers in order to take over the drug market. Subsequent acts of violence were then almost always related to the enforcement of drug debts.

Thus, despite participants initially being keen to present high profile incidents of County Lines group's violence as expressive and illustrative of them being sadistic, once discussed in detail it appeared more appropriate to interpret these events within the instrumental profit maximisation framework they had constructed to explain other aspects of the group'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). Furthermore, these insights also undermined the seductive notion that such groups and their activities can be explained as gangs. Indeed, this is backed up by the NCA (2017) who have recognised that County Lines groups are not necessarily gang affiliated.

Summary & Conclusion

This article has provided an initial exploration into how police officers experiencing the emergence of County Lines are interpreting the issue. No claims of representativeness can be made, nor was this the intention of the study, but the prominence of the 'profit maximisation' framework employed by all of the participants does provide useful insight into the police's perspective. Indeed, the analysis is arguably strengthened given its congruence with some of the initial police responses to County Lines visible nationally, such as the granting of new police powers to shut down specific phone lines. While conscious of the importance of remaining critical, as a framework, the notion of profit maximisation does appear to provide valuable explanatory power for much County Lines activity even if, in the case of violence, it is tempting for this to be initially depicted in relation to some of the more stereotypical myths that surround drug dealers (Coomber 2006). Indeed, framed in this 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. At a practical level, this may then help to frame a crime script analysis (Cornish 1994), something that Windle and Briggs (2015a) propose may be useful for developing a greater understanding of County Lines and formulating effective responses.

Linking neatly with the concept of profit maximisation discussed in this paper, Coomber and Moyle (2017) suggest it might be appropriate to understand County Lines as evocative of neoliberal market rationality and the type of moral order associated with companies such as *Amazon*. Data derived from this study outlining the conduct of County Lines groups and their popularity among local user populations would suggest this comparison is particularly apt. But it may also be possible to take this analogy further. For example, 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 local community, but continue to buy from them anyway due to its convenience and inexpensive products. So too, it would appear, is a similar process undertaken by local drug users in relation to County Lines groups, with the availability and quality of their products, promoted by marketing strategies, making them a highly attractive option. This process is then 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 buyers little alternative and having little incentive to operate in ways that do not create or reduce drug markets harms (see, Maher and Dixon 1999).

Yet, despite its apparent explanatory and analytic utility, it would be unwise to purely frame the characteristics, motivations and our overarching understanding of County Lines purely in relation to profit maximisation. Shutting the door on other explanatory frameworks

is premature. As subcultural theorists have long stressed, 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, Cohen 1955). Returning to the three key roles of County Lines groups and those who inhabit them (Coomber and Moyle 2017), it would appear unwise to universally attribute these actors with the same motivations. Indeed, the social media analysis of Storrod and Densley (2017) illustrates that some of those involved in County Lines are also engaging in behaviour that seemingly cannot be adequately understood through the lens of profit maximisation.

Seeking to examine behaviour that is not encapsulated in rational choice models would thus appear worthwhile. Drawing on concepts such as subterranean structuration (Stevens 2011), which highlights the cultural values that 'run under the skin of capitalism' (Densley and Stevens 2015, p.113), pose as potentially valuable theoretical avenues worth exploring if more sophisticated understandings are to be formulated. This stresses a research agenda that seeks to engage with County Lines dealers themselves. Not having done so is, of course, a major limitation of this study. As has been stressed, relying on law enforcement perspectives is unlikely to provide a wholly accurate picture of a drug market (Coomber 2004, Ritter 2006). Gaining suitable access to these groups would provide the opportunity to shed light on whether their decision making and general conduct is quite as business orientated as has been suggested. In turn this can then also be related back to analysing policing strategies. Not all police responses to County Lines have been solely based on the notion of targeting offenders desire to generate profit. Recall, for example, the rationale provided for charging offenders under the Modern Slavery Act (2015).

It is clear that, due to its emergent and increasingly high profile nature, County Lines is an issue ripe for further empirical exploration. Not only is further research important for theory development, but it is arguably only by gaining this understanding that appropriately

informed policy responses can be formulated. As shown by the tactic of franchising, something which is not discussed in the extant literature, there is still seemingly much County Lines activity that is yet to be fully brought to light. In fact, as the NCA (2017) acknowledge, more fundamental questions such as why and how County Line groups choose the areas they move into still remain unclear. Consistent with their overarching interpretation, participants broadly believed the migratory process to be a rational and considered decision centred on where they perceived they would have the best chance to take over the market. But, as Windle and Briggs (2015a) note, insights from routine activities theory would suggest that County Lines groups are highly unlikely to simply move to a completely foreign area and ‘set up shop’ without some form of prior connection. At the very least one might suspect that a certain level of scoping and reconnaissance may be undertaken. Existing contacts, perhaps generated through prisons, may also be utilised. Without further research these important questions will remain unanswered.

How the police use their new powers allowing them to shut down specific phone lines identified as being used by County Line groups will also be worthy of monitoring. Clearly, this tactic holds intuitive appeal given the integral role of the phone line in County Lines supply and, as outlined in this study, the importance these groups place on the line and associated brand. But the enduring observation of drug market adaptability (see, for example, Maher and Dixon 1999) would suggest that it is likely, even if this tactic does prove initially useful, that such groups will swiftly respond and adjust their methods accordingly. Given the presence of these groups online (Storrod and Densley 2017), the internet could be considered as a communicative tool which such groups may seek to adopt if the use of a mobile phone line becomes problematic. However, as the developing body of research on cryptomarkets has shown, the purchasing of heroin and crack via online methods remains severely limited

(Barratt *et al.* 2016). The willingness or propensity for their customers to adapt to an online market would thus appear unlikely.

While much attention has been placed on the use of violence, involvement of young people (APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults 2017) and the exploitation of vulnerable local populations (NCA 2016), there has been little consideration given to the interaction between different County Line groups. Evidence from this study would suggest that relations between many may be relatively harmonious, with some prepared to engage with others to further mutual benefits. However, if the NCA (2017) are correct in their recent assessment that the number of County Lines groups is continuing to rise, there would appear a significant risk of increasing rivalry between groups, and inevitably an increase in violence. Furthermore, if popular host towns become saturated by County Lines groups, it would seem likely that the phenomenon will spread further to other, perhaps smaller towns, or the few force areas yet to experience such activity.

As the phenomenon of County Lines inevitability persists and adapts, the focus may well then turn to how police can limit the negative impact of such groups. A growing trend within the drug policing literature has been to propose the application of harm reduction principles to the policing of drug markets (Bacon 2016a, 2016b, Caulkins and Reuter 2009, Stevens 2013). In short, it is suggested that the focus of policing should be shifted to reducing drug market harms rather than seeking to reduce supply. Such strategies somewhat rest on treating drug dealers as rational individuals, primarily focused on material gain. But if, as the participants of this study would suggest, profit maximisation is the appropriate way to explain these groups, then it may well be that such approaches pose as suitable and beneficial ways of successfully responding to this form of dealing.

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