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**The Changing Shape of Street-Level Heroin and Crack Supply in England – Commuting, Holidaying and Cuckooing Drug Dealers Across ‘County Lines’**

**Abstract:**

Street-level drug markets have traditionally been understood as operating predominantly at a local level and there has been an absence of contemporary research that has challenged accepted thinking around their shape and organisation. This article aims to outline an important development in the retail drug supply landscape, analysing a fast evolving and expanding drug supply model which involves ‘outreach’ selling from major supply hubs, direct to heroin/crack users in provincial satellite areas. Drawing on a mixed method approach analysing heroin/crack markets in six English locales, we explore how so-called ‘county lines’ drug dealing manifests in these spaces. Findings suggest that distinctive supply practices including ‘commuting’, ‘holidaying’ and ‘cuckooing’ have emerged, and that out-of-town dealers regularly exploit local vulnerable populations in order to maximise economic gain in these new ‘host’ drug markets.

**Keywords:** drug markets; drug dealing; drug supply; cuckooing; heroin/crack; vulnerability

**Introduction:**

*City drug gangs are muscling into rural and coastal towns says report*

(The Guardian, 12th August 2016)

 Drug markets can be a greater or lesser problem for local communities (Edmunds et

al. 1997). It is increasingly recognized that the form drug markets take and the transactional

practices of those engaged in supply and purchase within them can differ in important and meaningful ways. This differentiation (Coomber 2015) means markets with apparently similar structures manifest themselves differently in terms of practice— particularly regarding violence and intimidation—in different geographical locations. Pearson et al. (2001) state that there is not a national market so much as a ‘series of loosely interlinked local and regional markets’ (vii). Cities like London, Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool, for example, have historically served as national supply ‘hubs’ (NCA 2016), providing bulk amounts to mid-level distributors in cities and towns some distance from themselves. Once these substances are transported from regional hubs and ‘dropped’ (or picked up and taken back to provincial markets by established sellers), they would be sold by local wholesalers and filter into the local retail market through transactions undertaken by lower-level retail sellers (Matrix Knowledge Group 2007) and local ‘user-dealers’, often ‘born and bred’ in the area (May et al. 2005). 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’. Drug markets evolve however (May and Hough 2004), and despite online sales via the deep web experiencing exponential growth (Barratt and Aldridge 2016), this is not for the most part in the area of retail-level sales to heroin and crack users where face-to-face transactions remain predominant (Coomber 2015). While this traditional model no doubt still exists to some degree, specific developments in local retail markets in the United Kingdom are sparking an evolution of approaches to trafficking, drug sales and supply structures around heroin and crack cocaine that is fast changing the landscape of street-level drug markets and what happens within them. The alteration we refer to, and the focus of this article, has become known as ‘county lines’ drug dealing, where, in opposition to traditional practice, drug dealers are engaging in outreach activity and travelling from their urban hub to provincial towns and cities within a wide radius of their home turf, not just to deliver their product to that location as a ‘weight’ but also to retail it there themselves.

The mobile phone ‘line’ is central to the success of this emergent drug supply model, and it is this which effectively connects local drug users to a hub city dealer operating in their local village or town (Coomber and Moyle 2012). Drug dealing is usefully understood as a business model, and both the expansion and success of county lines operations hinge on two important factors. Firstly, that by moving outside of established inner-city drug markets, drug dealers are able to expand their business by targeting ‘host towns’ that are not already saturated with rival dealers. Secondly, displacement of sales transactions to provincial areas offers distance and anonymity for county lines dealers, who either manage the operation from their urban locale without having to visit these markets (NCA 2015; HM Government 2016) or if operating independently, travel back and forth. With county lines dealers residing outside of the host town, new supply practices have emerged to operationalize cross (county) border drug distribution. ‘Commuting’ (Hales and Hobbs 2010; Coomber and Moyle 2012) describes the way in which dealers travel to a satellite dealing locale and sell throughout the course of the day, with the seller returning to their urban hub at close of business. ‘Holidaying’ is a minor extension of commuting where county lines dealers stay overnight or for a few nights (e.g. in bed and breakfasts or other short-term lodgings) and then return to their home/hub location (Coomber and Moyle 2012). A distinctive aspect of the county lines model relates to the harnessing of vulnerable populations to undertake the supply operation at street-level. Dependent drug users, vulnerable women, looked after children, and adults with welfare needs are habitually targeted and recruited in a variety of front-line roles including as ‘drug runners’ (see Windle and Briggs 2015), ‘commuters’ and for ‘cuckooing’ (Coomber and Moyle 2012). In the latter, ‘cuckooing’ (named after the ‘parasitic’ nest stealing practices of wild cuckoos) describes the situation where a county lines dealer ‘takes over’ accommodation located in the provincial drugs market, using it as a local dealing base. This practice has also been identified in Canada (see Butera 2013) and is achieved through targeting local vulnerable populations: addicted drug users who are paid and controlled through access to drugs, or through cultivating relationships with men and woman—often vulnerable through learning difficulties, disabilities or mental health problems (NCA 2015; 2016). The cuckooing experience can be understood as one characterized by a spectrum of harm (see Moyle forthcoming). But although there are accounts of cooperation and ‘mutually beneficial relationships’ between dealers and residents (Moyle, forthcoming), this living arrangement has led many individuals to describe experiences of physical violence, intimidation, mental abuse and exploitation (Coliandris 2015; HM Government 2016).

Though the expansion of commuting drug dealing is an ongoing development, the UK’s National Crime Agency (NCA) have pronounced county lines as a ‘national issue’ and in a strategy report on the new Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation Programme (2016), HM Government (2016) also highlighted the mounting threat of this supply approach, positioning tackling county lines and the ‘exploitation of vulnerable people by a hard core of gang members to sell drugs’ as the first of their six identified priorities for 2015/16’ (p. 2–3). The inherent newsworthiness of this phenomenon has recently started to filter into the public arena. Most strikingly, the use of children reputedly ‘ruthlessly groomed and exploited by organised crime groups who send them the length and breadth of the country’ to carry drugs and money to rural satellite locations (ITV News 2016) has captured the imagination of the mainstream media. While the exploitation of young people as drug couriers has been warned to be the ‘next grooming scandal’ (Evening Standard 2017), the recurrent exploitation of vulnerable adults also represents a significant safeguarding issue (HM Government 2016). With 71 percent of police forces in England and Wales reporting county lines activity within their force borders (NCA 2016), the scramble to coordinate an effective national response that controls the saturation of commuting, holidaying and cuckooing dealers in provincial

locales has been said to pose a number of ‘wicked’ operational challenges for local forces and national policing bodies (Coliandris 2015). Notwithstanding the pernicious nature of the county lines threat, there has been scant attention paid to this developing dealing modality in academia (Windle and Briggs 2015). In an attempt to fill this void, we aim to reveal the transforming street level supply landscape in many parts of England, drawing upon illicit drug market research undertaken from 2012 onwards in six English drug markets. This research documents a form of criminality that relies on the active targeting and exploitation of vulnerable populations and that prioritizes capital accumulation in distant geographies over the convenience of ‘doing’ crime in less lucrative home territories. It also aims to update a literature base that casts street-level drug markets as operating at predominantly local level with supply undertaken mainly by ‘homegrown’ user-dealers (Matrix Knowledge Group 2007). Drawing on the narratives of those who purchase from and undertake street-level dealing work for county lines dealers, it also aims to elucidate the extent to which the experience of buying and working within the local drug market is changing. Themes of vulnerability and exploitation are central to the county lines phenomenon and those who become entangled in it. We deal with this issue explicitly elsewhere (see Moyle forthcoming), but in this article, we choose to take the opportunity to introduce county lines drug dealing to the criminological milieu and aim to provide an exposition of the inner workings and dynamics of this fast-evolving supply model.

**Background**

**Crime, Distance and Migration**

Analysing the relationship between crime, space and place has been a vital part of the criminological research agenda since the early twentieth century, and in mapping the spatial distribution of criminality, the ‘journey to crime’, or the study of the distance between an offender's residence and offence site has represented one of the most robust and predictable relationships between crime and space in the field (van Koppen and De Keijser, 1997), postulating that the further the distance from an offender’s home, the fewer crimes committed (Philips, 1980). This literature tends to focus on perpetration in regard to robbery and violent crime, but very little is known about journeys to illicit drug supply (Johnson et al., 2013). Elsewhere, organised crime literature has documented some interesting trends in regard to ‘crime migration’, charting, for example, the ‘functional mobility’ of established Mafia groups like the Camorra (Allum, 2016), and the rise of what has become known as itinerant crime or “mobile banditism” (Huisman and Van der Laan, 2005). In the latter, perpetrators of such crimes are largely understood as deriving from Eastern Europe, and while for some groups itinerancy is a way of life, it is argued that others may travel because they function as “criminal commuters” (Canter and Larkin, 1993). In their study of Romanian mobile offenders operating in Belgium, Van Daele and Vander Beken (2010) noted diverse motivations for travelling to crime. Rationales included financial benefit– i.e. the belief that operating outside the city in wealthy areas would lead to higher profits. Risk was also important - smaller municipalities have fewer police, which reduced the risk of arrest. Finally, distant communities contained more secluded houses, making it less likely to be seen, and therefore offering a higher perceived success rate (p.6).

Like organised crime groups, drug markets develop and grow; often subject to adaptation through law enforcement pressures (May and Hough, 2004), evolving in reaction to new sellers entering the market, or modifying their operations to employ the benefits of new technologies (Edmunds et al., 1997). Research literature has identified the propensity for street drug markets to become more ‘mobile’ (May and Hough, 2004), permitting the buyer and seller to prearrange locations for transactions to take place (Curtis and Wendel, 2000). Yet, apart from the suggestion that such flexibility may ‘represent considerable scope for growth’ (Mcsweeney et al., 2008:9) and may ‘pose new challenges for enforcement agencies’ (May and Hough, 2004:13), in no sense did this suggest street-level, retail drug supply to be evolving into a practice that is controlled beyond local limits, or as characterised by migration or travel in the way we have just related in Europe. Hales and Hobbs (2010) had noted that some drug dealers were at that time doing a ‘commute’ from one London borough to the Home Counties and South Coast of England, but this was accompanied with little detail. The authors may well have been observing the beginnings of the burgeoning county lines model, but at this point these traits were not discussed outside the context of this case study, nor were they suggested as encompassing a new, emergent outreach retail supply model. So, while there is an emerging literature that documents international crime migration and the materialisation of new dark net technologies for selling recreational drugs (Barratt and Aldridge, 2016), the dominant ‘local user-dealer model’ still remains the exemplar for understanding retail level heroin and crack markets in the UK. Accordingly, the rapid development of the street-level distribution model and the spread of ‘travelling’ retail dealers is one not yet detailed in academic research.

**Drug Enterprises: Organised and Independent Criminality**

Numerous criminological research studies, spanning various geographical landscapes and time points have generated a diverse collection of drug dealing typologies (Dorn et al., 1990). These frameworks have tended to differentiate the drug supply role by virtue of the kind of market structure that the supplier inhabits – for example, whether they are freelance or part of a more organised distribution structure (Coomber, 2006). Complexity is key, and it is often deemed helpful to split the drugs market into retail, middle, wholesale and importer level categories (Pearson et al., 2001). Situated at the bottom of the supply pyramid, many independent retail-level dealers are more likely driven by the need to ‘earn a score’ (Coomber and Moyle, 2015) and subsidise their own drug use than to fulfil the traditional profit motivated mores associated with drug firms and commercially motivated sole traders. Individuals with these kinds of motivations are commonly understood as ‘user-dealers’ – a group we might best understand as drug users first and dealers second (Coomber, 2006). Their participation in the illicit drugs economy as ‘suppliers’ is shaped by a myriad of factors including their ability to access substances and their aversion to other income generating ‘real crimes’ like shoplifting (Coomber and Moyle, 2015). Traditionally, user-dealers are local to the area in which they sell (May and Hough, 2004) and while some might operate independently, others will acquire drugs from and sell on behalf of commercially minded drug dealers (Coomber and Moyle, 2015). One important aspect that unites this group is their role in undertaking supply to *end-users*, effectively linking the lowest tier street drug market to the middle market (McSweeney et al., 2008).

In contrast, middle market dealing organisations are likely made up of opportunistic entrepreneurs from an array of different backgrounds (Akhtar and South, 2000), and their organisational structures range anywhere from lone ‘freelancers’, ‘family businesses’, and ‘communal businesses’ to the large formal hierarchies of ‘corporations’ (May and Hough, 2004). One of the best-known studies of illicit drugs trade in the UK, undertaken by the Matrix Knowledge Group (2007), distinguishes middle market supply between ‘national dealers’, and ‘local dealers’ (p.28). The characteristics of ‘national dealers’ comprised being part of a small ‘firm’, having long careers, being adaptable to moving on to new dealing methodologies and possessing the capacity to make entrepreneurial step changes in their enterprises by exploiting seemingly haphazard connections. In contrast, ‘local dealers’ were more likely to be categorised as ‘sole traders’. In the contemporary context however, distinguishing middle market supply in this way arguably has limited value. While there have been identifications of the displacement of city dealers to new rural markets (Pitts, 2008), often as a result of enforcement, around ten years after the influential Matrix Knowledge Report (2007) was first published, the saturation of dealers in inner city areas has not been accompanied by a growing number of users (Ruggiero, 2010: 51). Ultimately this has prompted more entrepreneurial suppliers to look elsewhere (Windle and Briggs, 2015), and as such, delineating middle market supply through ‘national’ wholesale and ‘local’ street dealing might now be rendered increasingly anachronistic.

**Out of Town Dealers (OTD) and the Scope of County Lines Activity**

Far from fitting neatly into these drug dealing typologies, the county lines dealing model obfuscates traditional drug market structures by transcending local, and sometimes even regional boundaries. It is now suggested that 85% of ‘host’ supply locales (i.e. those rural locations targeted by urban dealers) encountered travelling dealers from London, although other itinerant drug dealers have been reported to have travelled from Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Reading and Essex (NCA, 2015). In an article entitled ‘*police drugs team cracking the gangs who train in city*’, Sgt James Blackmore reports that local policing operation, ‘Bilbo’, led to the seizure of over £230,000 of class A drugs, and that many of those arrested were ‘junior’ London ‘gangsters’ who had been ‘sent to Oxford to prove their worth’ (Oxford Mail, 2013). While the ‘gang’ term is much contested (Pitts, 2008) and is characterised by a diverse collection of typologies, most relevant for our purposes is the official definition, where gang-related drug dealing is defined as supply of a controlled drug related to ‘the activities of a group that: a) consists of at least three people; and, b) has one or more characteristics that enable its members to be identified by others as a group’ (Home Office, 2015). Drawing upon this statutory definition, the NCA (2016) tends to depict county lines activity as a gang problem and suggest those involved in county lines deriving from London tend to be predominantly black British or Afro-Caribbean, whereas those working from Liverpool and Manchester were of White British or European descent (p.6). Pitts (2008) describes drug dealing as the major preoccupation of gangs, which is said to offer ‘flexible’ business where you ‘make your own hours’ but enjoy ‘unlimited earning potential’ (Densley, 2012: 74). In addition, in marginalised spaces, crimes like drug dealing can also become an instrument for ‘achieving imaginary positions of social distinction and respect’ (Treadwell et al., 2012: 11).

There exists a wealth of intelligence that signals the frequent involvement of gangs in county lines drug supply - not only recorded through police identification but through self-nomination on arrest (Storrod and Densley 2016). Though much less evident, there is also anecdotal evidence that suggests some county line drug dealing may be unconnected to gangs (RUSI, 2016) and is instead, undertaken by opportunistic independent sellers (see The Reading Chronicle, 2017). It is for this reason that in this paper we choose to substitute the word ‘gang’ and use the term ‘out-of-town dealers’ (hereafter OTD) to encapsulate the *range* of actors involved in this activity.

**Methods**

This research draws upon a body of work undertaken by the authors between 2012 -2016 comprising of drug market analysis undertaken in Southend-on-Sea (2012) (or ‘Southend’), Plymouth (2014) and Torbay/Torquay (2015), and a qualitative study investigating county lines as it manifests in three Wiltshire towns (2016). The first projects were commissioned by local Drug and Alcohol Action Teams (DAAT) and utilised Drug Market Rapid Analysis (DMRA) - a mixed-methods rapid appraisal (RA) approach (Stimson et al., 1999). The RA approach employed in these locations involved direct ethnographic observation, examination of extant and bespoke data sets (i.e. arrest records; forensic analysis of seizures) provided by national and local enforcement agencies and semi-structured interviews with key persons (e.g. police, intelligence officers and expert advisors) and local drug user/dealers. In Southend, Plymouth and Torbay/Torquay local drug services were interviewed alongside police as ‘key persons’ and they also acted as ‘research gatekeepers’ for user/dealer sample. Snowball sampling was also utilised as we started to engage with this group, providing access to more respondents. In total, 35 key persons were interviewed across the three research sites and 36, 29 and 30 ‘problem’ drug users/dealers (i.e., dependent/recovering heroin/crack users and suppliers) were recruited respectively in Southend, Plymouth and Torquay/Torbay (for a full discussion of these methods see Coomber, 2015).

The second data group is extracted from a recent research study undertaken in the Wiltshire towns of Salisbury, Swindon and Chippenham in the Summer of 2016. Following the emerging themes from the DMRA, this small, explorative, qualitative project focused on investigating the mechanics of county lines drug dealing in these geographical contexts. A key research aim was to understand how local vulnerable residents were recruited by OTD and how they experienced drug running and cuckooing. In Swindon, LM undertook an observation of the local street sex market and 21 in-depth interviews were undertaken across the three research sites with practitioners, drug ‘runners’ and individuals subject to cuckooing. Access was obtained through a local women’s addiction charity (Swindon) and local substance misuse centres (Salisbury and Chippenham); the service user sample were recruited on the basis that they had ‘regularly purchased drugs from’, or had ‘worked for’ OTD. In all research spaces, media coverage of arrests and prosecution of OTD were monitored. While media analysis was not a component of our methodology, in this paper we make reference to court proceedings and reports of arrests as an additional resource for mapping the geographies and connections between origin and host destinations.

**Findings**

**Drug Supply Routes and ‘Host Towns’.**

**FIGURE 1 HERE**

Distance and ease of access were important factors in the areas studied. Personal communication from the NCA and regional police forces suggest that Kent and Essex are (and have been to date) the counties with the highest saturation of OTD, with parts of Sussex following closely behind (RUSI, 2016). Marked within a concentric line (see figure 1), these counties surround London and benefit from fast and convenient transport links. One of the spaces analysed in this study, Southend-on-Sea (Essex), falls into this zone of saturation and provides an example of a developed county lines drug market. Located 40 miles from London, just over an hour’s drive and serviced by a direct train route, it was one of the earliest satellite towns to experience the saturation of non-local drug sellers that commuted in from their London hub. In contrast, at the time of the research, the seaside town of Torquay - at 3.5 hour’s drive, not quite the furthest but the most difficult to access - had almost no county lines presence. For Southend, police arrest data for the period Jan 2007 - Dec 2011 confirmed the early presence of OTD within the local heroin and crack cocaine markets there, with 33 (34%) of the 96 sellers arrested during the period associated with home residence postcodes outside of Southend – and principally from London boroughs such as Hackney, Lambeth, Barking, Ealing, Newham, Croydon, Westminster and Haringey. Interviews with local drug users supported these statistics, with all buyers of heroin and crack cocaine indicating that commuters predominated in that market space. In Swindon, a town around 80 miles due west of London and just over an hour by direct train, London dealers, closely followed by Birmingham sellers (1.5 hour’s drive from Swindon), dominated respondents’ narratives. Swindon, much like Reading, Oxford, and Chelmsford, is a location not in immediate proximity to London, but one that is located within a commutable radius of the capital. Due both to its ‘active’ street sex market and its geographical location, it appears to be experiencing a burgeoning county lines presence, with intelligence suggesting that around 12-18 county lines are established in the area (personal communication, 2017). In nearby Salisbury, situated 85 miles and just over 2 hour’s drive from London, local drug users and drug runners also described an influx of OTD and a transformation of the supply landscape from a drugs market previously dominated by indigenous user-dealers. It was suggested that historically, the city’s supply of heroin was maintained by local users, who would drive to Southampton or Bournemouth to ‘buy weight amounts’ of heroin and then return to sell within their networks. More recently however, respondents highlighted a symbiotic step change in the market where Salisbury was identified and targeted by OTD and local users engaged with, then supported this business - paving the way for a new market dynamic. Respondents speculated on the rationales for the selection of Salisbury as an emerging site of county lines drug dealing, and there was some consensus in the notion that the population of injecting drug users (IDU) was ‘rising’ and it was this that constituted a significant draw for OTD. In addition, this captive market of IDU was said to be all the more visible to OTD due to the existence of a number of hostels/supported housing premises located within the city. The transformation of this drug market might be understood as being exploited through the identification of visible demand for product and the absence of an organised drug economy. Luke explains:

Places like Southampton have had these business links for years, they started 30 years ago with Londoners coming down, and it’s fairly cemented into society now. Up here, you don’t have it, you have loads of 15 year olds selling a bit of weed, and a couple of ‘pikeys’ might sell coke, and stuff like that. You don’t have a solid, sort of, gang network, and that’s why they’re encroaching in on this now. They see the market, so it’s easy, all they’ve got to do is send someone down for a weekend.

Luke (23) crack user, Salisbury.

Salisbury was now suggested by some to be ‘saturated’ by county lines dealers, and one long-term resident claimed that ‘*people from out of town have basically sown up 95% of the business’*, emphasising that local users expressed a preference for a reliable and accessible supply source - qualities they associated with OTD:

Yeah, addicts are very happy people are coming in from out of town…More available, always answer their phone, 99.9% [of the time] they’ve got something. Cause before you would ring someone up and they’d be like ‘I’m waiting, it’s going to be a couple of hours’…and it wouldn’t be a couple of hours it’d be like 4 hours and the gear would be there and it’d be crap…it’s better quality, it’s more available, cheaper deals…

Jack (44) heroin user, Salisbury.

Located over 200 miles from London (over 4 hours by road and 3.5 hours by train), the picture in Plymouth at the time of the research in 2014 was quite different. Although some minor activity has been recently recorded (see Plymouth Herald, 2017), little evidence of county lines activity was found by the DMRA. Plymouth’s historical supply arrangements fit conventional understanding of national trafficking approaches whereby heroin and crack is trafficked by mid-market wholesaler hub suppliers either by delivering/trafficking direct to middle-market suppliers in Plymouth (or Plymouth suppliers travelling to the hub to collect) and sold locally ‘on the street’ by ‘home’ sellers. For Plymouth, both user/buyer and police intelligence consensus was that Plymouth’s heroin and crack supply continued to derive, predominantly, from Liverpool and Manchester via the M6, M5, A38 corridor, with occasional but less established supply also coming from London, and to be sold by local sellers. Arrest data (period Jan 2009 – Mar 2012), although confirming the presence of only 15 non-indigenous sellers over this period found that four of these were from nearby locations such as Exeter and Salisbury and only three being from Manchester/Liverpool. Given that low-level, locally employed street runners are more likely arrested than mid-level suppliers (Coomber et al., 2017), despite the evidence of some recent OTD presence (see below), this is likely indicative that the drug distribution model operating in Plymouth remains predominantly under this old supply model. Distance and access thus clearly appears to impact on the extent of county lines operations and, to date at least, the saturation of its reach.

**Commuting and ‘Holidaying’ across County Lines.**

Supporting the observations of Hales and Hobbs (2010), findings across all sites conveyed a ‘willingness to travel’ and to exploit new markets through commuting to provincial locations in order to distribute drugs over the course of a day. Notions of logistics, distance and risk are paramount here and due to the prohibitive characteristics of some geographical locations, commuters used tried and tested routes. In Salisbury for example, while some OTD tried to establish 24-48 hour dealing bases through ‘holidaying’ at a local flat, the city’s proximity to Bournemouth (35 minutes), Reading (1 hour 15 minutes) and London (2 hours) - along with the ability to access motorways or direct routes - provided the opportunity to commute daily, reducing the risk of becoming a sitting target through engaging in long term cuckooing arrangements. Estimates of commuters’ working hours varied across drug markets. The majority of respondents claimed OTD would capitalise on available selling time, beginning their shift at around 9am and returning around 9pm at night. Some respondents however, pointed out the later surfacing times of many addicted drug users; as a result, it was suggested that commuting drug dealers adjusted to these tendencies. Adaptation in selling practices was also observed as a risk minimization strategy utilised by OTD to moderate ‘heat’ from law enforcement. Liz explains:

They come down with a certain amount…they’ll take different days off a week; some days they just won’t be here. And that’s basically to evade the police catching them, which is a wise move really…

Liz (44) heroin and crack user, Southend

In Swindon, Southend and Salisbury it was widely suggested that commuting dealers would text buyers saved to their mobile phone’s contact list letting them know that they were ‘on their way,’ that they had quality drugs, and inviting them to request a sale. As highlighted by the NCA (2015, 2016), the centrality of the ‘(mobile phone) line’ – the phone held outside the county location, and through which customers normally place orders - is crucial not only for street users to order drugs, but as a technology in which OTD can *aggressively* market their presence and deals through a bombardment of text messages. Jack describes text messages he received from one OTD:

Yeah you know ‘best of both’ ‘good t-shirts’ umm all sorts I dunno, ‘cds, dvds’ or…if they want to get your number you will get that, even if you’re trying to stop and stick to your prescription you still get that text, you have to get a new number. Sometimes people would come down from out of town and literally pass out numbers you know, numbers would go around and they’d be like ring me, and once you rang ‘em once you’ll keep getting those texts.

Jack (44) heroin user, Salisbury.

Respondents in Swindon and Salisbury and stressed how these competitive communication strategies constituted a departure from the ‘old days’ where the emphasis would be on the user to search out supply avenues, and this was dubbed as particularly challenging for addicted drug users who were trying to limit or control their drug use.

**Cuckooing – A Varied Model**

Cuckooing was present in all six drug market spaces but predominated in Southend, Salisbury and Swindon. In keeping with the expansionist and unrelenting drive for profit characteristic of the county lines Modus Operandi, cuckooing seems to have emerged as a method for groups to overcome the limits of location and optimize their profits by operating on a 24-hour basis in new markets. Respondents who had become cuckooed by OTD described the length of these experiences to span anywhere between a week up to eight months - or as long as the dealers felt the operation was secure. Securing a local dealing base enabled OTD to attract a late night/early morning trade from the hardcore of drug users and sex workers that daily commuting drug sellers were unable to capture. This was especially true in Swindon where geographically, the heroin and crack cocaine markets were situated in close proximity to the Manchester Road street sex market - both facilitating and profiting from many of its peoples’ ‘work/use’ patterns of behaviour. In the research sites analysed here, ‘victims’ of cuckooing were most likely to be psychologically vulnerable women or drug dependent men/women. Respondents detailed a variety of experiences of cuckooing, stretching from those characterised by psychological abuse, violence and intimidation, to those described a ‘mutually beneficial’ arrangement that allowed them to fund chaotic drug habits. While enforcement narratives tend to concentrate on cuckooing as inherently exploitative (NCA 2015, 2016), it is important to recognise nuances in experiences of this practice, which are sometimes alternatively understood as a ‘renting’ and are not universally characterised by harm and coercion. As Gerry explains:

Most of them are people that have come down from London, they come down and they use people, they give someone a ‘turn on’, to use their flat or their house, to deal from, and they’ll say, like: ‘Depending on how much we sell today, we’ll give you two balls of crack and one ball of heroin, or two and two’… depending on how much they’ve sold, how much business they’ve done, whether you let them stay overnight, or whether you go out and just leave them your keys…So they’re sort of almost paying rental fees, in drugs.

Gerry (50) heroin and crack cocaine user, Southend

The appeal of housing OTD through ‘renting’ was articulated as promising reliable and convenient access to drugs, for little effort. However, the propensity for this arrangement to evolve into something more exploitative was not uncommon, and in Wiltshire, several respondents consequently reported becoming coerced into drug running and allowing OTD to ‘live in’ for extended periods (see Moyle, forthcoming). This model was also rolled out by some OTD in Plymouth, and Ben explains a similar experience for local drug users:

What they do is they get people in debt with them through drugs and then once they are in debt they are like, “well can we come in your flat for a minute.” Like for paying a visit or want to make a spliff or something and then once they are in your flat they get you in debt with them and then that’s it. They say like, “we are living here.” They don’t ask they just invade… and move in basically… They just keep bailing you [with drugs] so you are always in debt with them so that you are theirs basically.

Ben (25) heroin and crack, Plymouth.

Opportunities for OTD to recruit these local drug users and commandeer their properties often presented themselves naturally, but were also aggressively sought out. In Swindon and Salisbury, respondents emphasised how regular interactions in houses where drug users would congregate to smoke or inject drugs often led to direct offers for labour opportunities from OTD. Claire explains how a Birmingham ‘gang member’ initially recruited her as a runner in a local house:

**Respondent:** I was picking up from a house. They were usually set up, like you say, from somebody’s house and usually it was someone that I know. Salisbury’s quite small so the circle of people that you know is, well it is quite small, so you do know people half the time these houses you’re going around to like pick up from. I was approached by somebody when I was picking up and they asked me if I had local knowledge of the area and other users (in Salisbury)…which the answer was ‘yes’ and they asked me if I’d like to run a bit and they would sort me out.

**LM:** How soon did they start asking about a flat?

**Respondent:** Not long, within an hour. Especially cos I’m single and on my own as well…and I was young at the time as well, I was like perfect prey for them really.

Claire (36) crack and heroin user, Salisbury.

For Claire and a number of other respondents who told similar stories regarding their initiation in the county lines economy, data suggests that the interconnectedness of the lives of drug users and existence of a strong ‘moral economy’ (Wakeman, 2015) can offer the time and space for the communication and/or presentation of opportunities to make fast cash or cheap drugs more available; here, recruitment for county lines labourer is no exception.

**Supply Roles: ‘Sitters’, ‘Top boys’ and ‘Runners’.**

Becoming cuckooed or engaging in rental arrangements often provided opportunities for respondents to gain some insight into the county lines supply operation. Though there is some evidence of independent sellers adopting the county lines model (see The Reading Chronicle, 2017), in all the drug market spaces we visited, OTD were described as being part of a larger group or organisation. If respondents referred to these structures as ‘gangs’, ‘firms’ or ‘crews’ they tended to delineate this through observing ethnic connections or noticing street vernacular which was assumed to signify participation in an organised group. In Southend, respondents often identified OTD as members of ‘Somali gangs’, whereas in Wiltshire, ‘black African’ and ‘Pakistani’ men were most often branded as ‘gang members’. While there were observations of an overall supply hierarchy, the dealers our respondents interacted with were thought to be loosely structured entrepreneurial groups of similarly ranking friends, family or acquaintances undertaking a number of different roles (see Windle and Briggs, 2015). Due to the constraints of space, below we analyse some of the most central roles undertaken by OTD:

**‘Top Boys’:** Often our respondents had very little physical contact with those designated as the ‘main man’, ‘boss man’ or, most often, ‘top boy’, who protected themselves from enforcement risks through remaining in their urban base. That is not to say that these individuals were keeping operations at arm’s length. Respondents working as local drug runners or observing these operations as they played out in their accommodation described the ways in which bosses would carefully control the activities of runners from the end of a phone line:

It was all about precision…he had to give the say so ‘cos once we umm went to where the bloke was supposed to be sitting in town, and because he didn’t give a say so [he] said ‘turn around and go back’, it was very strict like that…If he didn’t know what was going on he’d tell you to go back... He’d be quite grumpy about it…[he’d] say ‘why’d you do that?’, ‘why’d you go in there without me saying so?’

Craig (47) heroin and crack user, Salisbury.

Top boys also attempted to monitor the outputs and performance of the county lines operation from the relative safety of their home locations. Craig (Salisbury) provided further examples of these displays of organisational discipline when he told us he was ‘*made to go and wake the sitter up at 7.30’*, which he deemed as ‘*very business-like’*. There were a small number of respondents who had come into contact with top boys who had made an occasional visit to their satellite site. In these circumstances our respondents noted a tangible sense of hierarchy, and witnessed the clambering for approval from junior members operating in these hyper-masculine environments:

Yeah like the big boss guy was something to be reckoned with…And yeah, you can see a hierarchy…you can see there’s always a desperate climb for them to be that…when they’re around somebody who’s higher up they’re all around him, sucking up.

Claire (36) crack and heroin user, Salisbury.

Evidence presented at the trial of Anthony Okopie (29), a London/Plymouth county lines ‘king pin’, elicits further insight into the world of top boys. Okopie was arrested and sentenced to twelve years for sending dealers to Plymouth twice a week with kilos of high quality heroin and crack cocaine. Though not arrested until January 2016, Okopie had already been identified as the ‘head of the gang’ and police believe he may have travelled down to Plymouth from London as far back as 2012 or 2013 to set up the operation before heading back to London, never to return (Plymouth Herald, 2017). In their study analysing the London Riots and consumer culture, Treadwell and colleagues (2012) stress the degree to which displaying the latest designer labels validated by local culture ensured respect and facilitated the distinguishing of the self as a ‘man to be reckoned with’ (p.11). In raiding Okopie’s bedsit in Peckham, police reported discovering ‘box after box after box of expensive designer trainers by Louis Vuitton and Gucci worth a total of £5,500’ (Plymouth Herald, 2017). Although profit levels will vary according to the efficiency and scale of the operation, Okopie’s case nonetheless provides useful insight into the potential rewards associated with reaching the upper echelons of the county lines drug economy.

**‘Sitters’:** In contrast to their distant relationships with top boys, respondents were far more closely connected to those who holidayed or cuckooed in provincial locations and oversaw the supply operation as they occurred in the context of the local dealing base. The individuals who directed deals in this space were known as ‘sitters’ and were widely agreed to be low-ranking group members, who in most cases, were still under the direction of top boys. Though it was not unheard of for some sitters were said undertake ‘drive and drop’ activity, their key role was to act manage the dealing operation in the host market and act as drugs custodian – protecting the stock of heroin and/or crack and distributing ‘shots’ (£10/£20 bags) to returning runners:

They’re classed as sitters, the men that they send down with the gear are classed as sitting people, so they sit there with the gear, and then they pay a runner to go and run the gear out and back, that sort of thing.

Craig (47) Heroin and crack user, Salisbury

Supporting intelligence from the National Crime Agency (2016), sitters in all six locations were frequently depicted as ‘young black gang members’ who frequently smoked cannabis but did *not* engage in the use of heroin and crack cocaine. Due to the predominantly white ethnic profile of all the satellite sites, respondents often highlighted the propensity for these actors to remain in the confines of their accommodation for long periods to avoid police interest or detection:

One of them was there all the time, the main one would come and go, he would go to London and get it (heroin), whereas the one who was renting the room was there all the time, he didn’t really leave the house to be honest.

Claire (36) crack and heroin user, Salisbury

One interviewee was told by a Birmingham sitter that he was paid around £200 per day (Craig, Salisbury), and our analysis suggests that the duration of residence or ‘shift’ for sitters could last anywhere between a few days up to eight months.

**‘Runners’:** In all locations drug runners could be understood as the most essential resource in the county lines operation, undertaking high risk and low paid ‘wage labour’ and connecting stock to consumers.Though our sample population comprised of locally recruited adult runners, media reporting of local court proceedings highlight the propensity for young runners to be recruited in the urban base and transported to rural locations in order to retail heroin and crack cocaine. In Swindon for example, a teenager from ‘inner London’ was arrested in possession of around £1000 of Class A drugs, mobile phones and cash. It was suggested that the young man (18) was a runner for a London gang, delivering drugs and selling them on the streets, and his defence solicitor claimed there ‘was evidence that he had been put under a degree of pressure to do what he did’ (see Swindon Advertiser, 2016). In the six drug markets we visited, local adults rather than children were said to undertake local drug running, and only one respondent, a psychologically vulnerable woman who was coerced into drug running, identified as a ‘non-user’. The remainder of the sample were adult, addicted drug users, recruited locally through opportunities to ‘get their drugs for free’. Payment for running drugs ranged from one £10 bag of heroin or crack cocaine (0.2 grams) up to ten £10 bags per day. Respondents across all sites most typically reported earning ‘a few’ (£10) bags for a day’s work. Runners often described long working hours in which they would be sent out from their flat or contacted via mobile phone - often at short notice - to fulfil individual (£10) deals to local users around the clock.

He gave me a phone and he would ring me…every time they’d ring his phone…so all the customers - or all the ‘cats’ they call them - they was calling his phone and then he’d call me and say you know ‘go and give five blue or five black’ and then I’d have to go meet them…

Gina (29) non-user, Swindon.

Being in close proximity to heroin and crack cocaine led a significant number of runners to report escalation of their drug habit and falling into debt with their dealer. But despite variable levels of exploitation and experiences of hard labour, in most cases interviewees still conceived running as a more convenient and less harmful income generating activity than sex work or theft - with the later described as becoming increasingly difficult in small cities like Salisbury and Plymouth when you were a ‘known offender.’

**Discussion**

In this paper, we present evidence of individuals undertaking substantial journeys of up to 295 miles (Liverpool to Plymouth) in order to cultivate and exploit provincial drug markets. Crime and its intimate partnership with distance is thus called into question by a developing retail drug supply model branded by a dynamic, adaptive approach, which transposes county borders and prioritises profit over geographical convenience and travelling effort. Much like itinerant offenders’ rationales for moving across Europe, motivations for employing an outreach supply methodology were suggested as being tied up with profit and increased opportunities/success rates (Vander Beken and Van Daele, 2010). Distant markets were reported to be selected by OTD due to the lack of discernible organised competition that we might expect to see in the OTD’s urban home locale (NCA, 2015, 2016). Moreover, supporting the findings of Windle and Briggs (2015), the presence of a visible population of addicted drug users also signaled a captive market and demand for product. To exploit these commercial opportunities, the advent of cuckooing and holidaying has evolved as a practice where OTD can capitalise on 24/7 trade and are less constrained by their geographical location. There are caveats to this and it should be noted that commuters do encounter such limitations, being far more likely to operate and cluster around the Home Counties, Essex and Sussex (RUSI, 2016; Hales and Hobbs, 2009) than they are to venture to markets in geographically inconvenient locales. In this respect, though cuckooing and holidaying can be used to overcome the logistical problems of daily outreach sales, distant isolated drug markets like Torbay/Torquay and Plymouth currently have a far lower concentration of county lines operating than locations such as Southend and can still be understood as working predominantly under the ‘old’ user-dealer model.

Turning to the mechanics of the county lines operation, while much less was known about the management of the dealing operation as it occurs in its urban locale, our interviewees were able to illustrate aspects of protocol in the rural/coastal context. Top boys protected themselves by largely avoiding the provincial markets that they profited from. However, data showed that they actively micromanaged their enterprises from afar, employing sitters to organise street-level supply in satellite sites. In the context of this study, OTD were understood as being part of an organised group, and though the data was unable to provide a clear picture of the shape of these structures, ‘street’ vernacular and friendship ties between members were thought to signify gang membership. In 1996, Collison pointed to the intimate relationship between drug crime, masculinity and consumption, exploring the ways in which criminal activity such as drug dealing could offer opportunities for ‘status success’ and a powerful masculine street image (p.440). Over twenty years later, Storrod and Densley (2016) argue that the rise of social media serves to provide an ‘expressive’ platform for some urban OTD to promote skills in drug sales and post evidence of their success in cross county drug supply. Online posts showing ‘photos of money supposedly made from working county lines’, and even train tickets to towns visited whilst ‘going country’ (see Storrod and Densley, 2016:9) are consistent with data here which indicates the level of respect and prospective rewards associated with leaving urban locations to supply drugs across county lines.

Traditionally, studies have highlighted the propensity for intensive policing to affect the structure of drug markets, creating a ‘vacuum’ (Aitkens et al., 2002) and leaving these areas vulnerable to displacement by more ‘organised, professional and enduring forms of criminality’ (Maher and Dixon, 1999:503). Findings here suggest that while police operations targeting local user-dealers will almost certainly create a space for OTD to capitalise on demand for heroin and crack cocaine, this new methodology - which is perceived to offer fast, good quality drugs around the clock - has the potential to supersede local supply networks, irrespectively. This is not to suggest that local user-dealers become superfluous in the local drug economy, but it is to imply that they are highly liable instead to become entangled in the county lines supply model, taking up high risk running roles, becoming cuckooed, or entrusted to sell drugs on behalf of OTD. As such, where previously these actors may have engaged in the ‘moral economy’ (see Wakeman, 2015) to purchase drugs, given the propensity for OTD to aggressively recruit addicted local drug users for cuckooing or drug running, they are now likely to become involved in more harmful labour – designed to exploit their vulnerability and more likely to leave them exposed to an intensified drug habit, psychological harm, debt, violence and arrest (see Moyle, forthcoming).

While all drug markets rely to some extent on unequal relationships between those who undertake street labour and those who organise it (McSweeney, 2008), county lines drug dealing might be argued to bear some of the unique characteristics of the neoliberal age. In considering neoliberalism as a criminological project, Brown (2011) refers to the ways in which it turns from policy to practice. This includes the development of the ‘24/7 phenomenon’, an ‘expansion of the time and space of the market’, ‘new transaction intensive markets’ and the ‘maximization of new suppliers to increase competition’ (p.130). Much like the unregulated capitalism characteristic of companies like *Amazon*, county lines drug dealing is evolving as a model replicated across the country that is unethical and subject to built-in, ongoing processes of continuous re-engineering (Davis, 2014). More commonly adopted by groups understood as ‘gangs’, but also undertaken by opportunistic independent retailers, OTD first identify then seek to exploit new provincial drug markets. For county lines customers, while previously, local drug users commonly reported seeking out drug supply avenues from user-dealers in their local community, the county lines operation is responsive to market demand, and targets customers through aggressive sales techniques, enabling quick access to good quality drugs 24 hours a day. Whyte and Wiegratz (2016) suggest that this new market rationality is also underpinned by a distinctive ‘moral order’, and elsewhere, Hamann (2009) sums this up as the ‘cost benefit decisions grounded on market principles to the exclusion of all other ethical values and social interests’ (p.37). Though harnessing cheap disposable labour is not a new occurrence in drug markets, the increasing development of a predatory model that seeks to systematically target and exploit marginalised populations such as looked after children, psychologically vulnerable women and drug dependent adults by virtue of their vulnerability and perceived lack of power, is a step up from what has come before. In this respect, county lines could be said to echo aspects of the ‘moral order’ of neoliberalism (Whyte and Wiegratz, 2016), where instrumental concern with the maximisation of revenue and/or market control supplants ethical, or even pragmatic (risk related) considerations regarding the treatment of these populations.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we have provided the reader with an introduction to a new insidious drug dealing model, fast permeating provincial drug markets in the UK. Drawing on in-depth data from six rural/coastal localities, we hope to have provided the reader with a sense of the aims, logic and process of county lines drug dealing, with recourse to the narratives of those who engage with these groups, both as their workers and as their customers. Though data suggests that the tendrils of county lines are far more firmly rooted in markets characterised by closer proximity and ease of access (e.g. Swindon and Southend), county lines activity is still nonetheless beginning to seep into more distant drug markets. The findings in this article raise a number of questions, not least in regard to how we go about policing and safeguarding the needs of vulnerable populations who are actively targeted by OTD. These are questions that we aim to address elsewhere (see Moyle, forthcoming), but here, we stress the need for further research in this area. Due to the localised nature of our research methodology, reporting on the ways in which young people were utilised by OTD in the urban base was beyond the scope of this research. However, we emphasise the urgency of undertaking this work, with the aim of understanding young people’s initiation, role and desistance from county lines dealing. As a criminological project, in some ways the county lines story might be understood as evocative of the crude market rationality and moral order associated with neoliberalism (Whyte and Wiegratz, 2016). Further research undertaken with OTD would garner first hand, qualitative data which could usefully explore these themes while also analysing the form and structure of these groups. For scholars studying the drugs field, in the same way that dark markets are flourishing, the county lines model provides yet another valuable example of how, in the context of prohibition, the illicit drugs economy shows no sign of faltering and is instead mutating and shifting through ingenuity and adaptation.

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**Figure 1: Map with research sites (arrowed) and other indicativecommuting locations**.