

## About HEROES

HEROES is structured as a comprehensive solution that encompasses three components: **Prevention**, **Investigation** and **Victim Assistance**. HEROES will establish a coordinated contribution with LEAs by developing an appropriate, victim-centred approach that is capable of addressing specific needs and providing protection. Moreover, HEROES will establish new innovative strategies that in the short, medium and long term will improve the way in which LEAs and CSOs carry out criminal investigations, assist rescued victims, and prevent the occurrence of **Trafficking of Human Beings (THB)** and **Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSA/CSE)** crimes.

### Components

- 1 Prevention**  
Implementing a mixed approach of technology and social action.
- 2 Investigation**  
Developing technological tools that cover the most important needs of LEAs: data gathering and analysis while embracing the very technical, ethical and legal challenges unique to fighting THB and CSA/CSE crimes.
- 3 Victim Assistance**  
Focusing on prevention and developing technological tools for more effective investigations.

## Impact

- Victims** Improvement of the cooperation between main parties involved, by means of developing an integral and transversal system that is victim-centred, thereby reducing secondary victimisation.
- Citizens** Citizens of THB and CSA/CSE. It will also increase the European community's perception of security.
- NGOs** The support of international NGOs will be an enormous value to help victims and to tackle THB and CSA/CSE from a global perspective. This partnership will benefit from bidirectional knowledge sharing between researchers and NGOs.
- LEAs** Toolkits to gather information, analyse multimedia files securely, identify victims and offenders and enhanced training curricula focusing on victim's needs from which investigations can prove to be more effective.

## Objectives

The main goal is to use technology to improve the way in which help and support can be provided to victims of THB and CSA/CSE.

## Consortium partners

7 LEAs, 5 Technical Partners, and 11 Other Partners.

## Case Study – WP 4 Task 4.4:

### Children and young adults recruited for County Lines drug trafficking – identifying vulnerabilities that put young people at risk as well as the signs a child or young adult is being exploited by County Lines gangs.

## Methodology & Objectives of Case Study

Trilateral Research (TRI) conducted a case study assessing the phenomena of **County Lines drug trafficking** and **Cuckooing** in the UK in relation to Trafficking in Human Beings (THB). This study aimed to identify (1) **vulnerabilities** that increase a young person's risk of being recruited, and (2) **indicators** to help frontline responders to spot if children and young adults are involved with County Lines.

We conducted in-depth literature review and 6 interviews with professionals as well as frontline responders (covering Academia, the Housing Sector/Law, LEAs, and City Councils).

## County Lines & Cuckooing in the UK – Key Statistics & Definitions

The UK government defines County Lines as “gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of ‘deal line’” (Home Office, 2020). Those gangs and organised criminal networks “(...) are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons” (Home Office, 2020).

It is estimated that approximately 1,000 different County Lines are operating across the UK, with each line generating about £800,000 a year.

Children are considered to make up most victims groomed into UK County Lines gangs, with numbers growing consistently and significantly over the last years (Figure 1). In total, 2,053 County Lines NRM referrals were flagged in 2021, increasing by 23% compared to the previous year. Children involved with criminal gangs such as County Lines are often considered perpetrators rather than victims by LEAs.

**Cuckooing** refers to the phenomenon of County Lines drug dealers taking over an accommodation located in provincial areas to use them as local drug dealing bases. The term ‘cuckoo’ in this context refers to the cuckoo bird's practice of taking over nests of other birds.

Both County Lines and Cuckooing overlap with other forms of exploitation and crimes covered under the UK's Modern Slavery Act 2015.

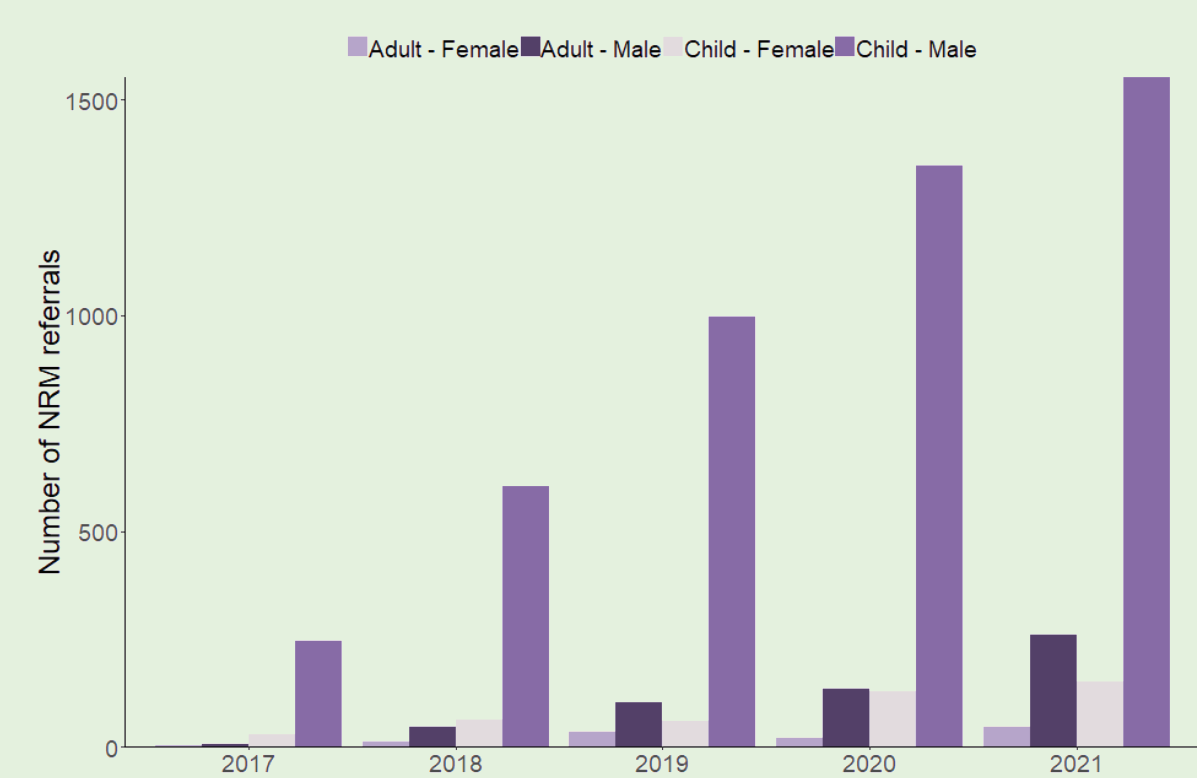


Figure 1: Number of NRM referrals flagged as County Lines, by age group at exploitation and gender (Home Office, 2022).

## THB in the UK – Key Statistics & Definitions

In the UK, human trafficking is understood as an element of **modern slavery**. Modern slavery is defined as “an umbrella term that covers several different forms of exploitation which can include human trafficking, labour exploitation, criminal exploitation, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude” (HM Government, 2021: p. 11). The **2014 Modern Slavery Strategy** and **Modern Slavery Act 2015** frame modern slavery in England and Wales.

Public authorities in England and Wales must refer a potential victim (a child or consenting adult) into the **National Referral Mechanism (NRM)**. To be considered a victim of human trafficking, the UK government refers to the three elements of **Action, Means, and Purpose** of exploitation.

With an increase of 20% compared to the previous year, 12,727 potential victims of modern slavery were referred through the NRM in 2021. Real numbers are estimated to be much higher. In the most recent quarter, 79% of NRM referrals were either men or boys and 21% of the referrals were either women or girls.

Modern slavery in the UK increasingly affects children: In 2021, 43% of referrals to the NRM claimed they had been exploited as children. Out of the victims who were minors, 79% were boys and 21% were girls in 2021. Children were mostly referred as a result of criminal exploitation.

## County Lines & Human Trafficking – Links

**The Act** – Individuals are recruited and may be transported as well as transferred from big cities to small towns where they might be harboured or received at a trap house/cuckooed property. Figure 2 shows a poster used by the National Crime Agency (NCA) to raise awareness of County Lines – and children going missing.

**The Means** – To recruit individuals over 18 (the aspect of means does not need to be applied for minors), gangs will use some form of coercion, deception, abuse of power, utilisation of the position of vulnerability of the person to be exploited, and payments or benefits to lure people into gangs or to take over their property.

**The Purpose** – Children and adults will be trafficked for the purpose of exploitation for criminal activities, but they are likely to be sexually exploited as well.



Figure 2: Poster by the NCA (NCA, n.d. a.).

## County Lines – Key Vulnerabilities

The study shows that every child and young adult is at risk to be groomed and exploited by County Lines gangs. Identified vulnerabilities cover: **Age, Gender, Socioeconomic status, Ethnicity/nationality, Family context, Housing, Health & Education, Peer relationships, Criminal record**, and vulnerabilities stemming from the **COVID-19 pandemic**. The study stresses that **intersecting vulnerabilities** increase risks.

Crucially, children growing up in an **impoverished and neglected environment** appear particularly vulnerable to recruitment and grooming attempts. The **promise of money as well as increased social status** function as key pull factors.

Notably, a young person is considered to be more at risk if they suffer from **mental health problems** or have **substance misuse issues**, have a **physical disability** or **developmental disorders**. In addition, having been **excluded from mainstream education** is thought to be a critical event increasing vulnerability (as well as **underachieving at school**, etc.).

## County Lines – Indicators

Indicators are divided into Act, Means, and Purpose – working along the definition of THB. Understanding if somebody is a victim rather than a perpetrator will enable the provision of adequate and much needed **safeguarding support**.

### Indicators of Action – Examples:

- A person is missing frequently from home for short and/or long periods.
- A person is found to be staying in unsafe accommodations.

### Indicators of Means – Examples:

- Suddenly having unexplained money and/or owning unexplained and unaffordable items.
- Receiving a huge amount of phone calls and/or texts (as a way of controlling the individual).

### Indicators of Purpose – Examples:

- Sudden change in use of language (using phrases/terms in relation to drug dealing and/or violence).
- The person is found with suspicious items or committing crimes linked to County Lines/criminal activities.

References:  
 HM Government (2021). 2021 UK Annual Report on Modern Slavery, October 2021. Modern Slavery Unit: London. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1033986/2021\\_UK\\_Annual\\_Report\\_on\\_Modern\\_Slavery.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1033986/2021_UK_Annual_Report_on_Modern_Slavery.pdf) (Accessed 23rd of August 2022).  
 Home Office (2022). Official Statistics. Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify statistics UK, end of year summary, 2021. March 2022. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2021/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2021> (Accessed 11th of July 2022).  
 Home Office (2020). Guidance: Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines. February 2020. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines> (Accessed 12th of July 2022).  
 National Crime Agency (NCA) (n.d. a). County Lines. Available at: <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/drug-trafficking/county-lines> (Accessed 12th of July 2022).

