

ISSUED BY MERSEYSIDE POLICE ON BEHALF OF 'TITAN', THE NORTH-WEST REGIONAL ORGANISED CRIME UNIT

TITAN IS AN EXTENTION OF ALL SIX NW LOCAL POLICE FORCES USING A COLLABORATION OF POLICE OFFICERS AND STAFF FROM ALL SIX FORCES IN THE NORTH WEST OF ENGLAND

The North West Regional Organised Crime Unit (TITAN) are today (Thursday, 14 December) launching a regional campaign to publicise the issue of 'County Lines', a tactic in which organised crime groups from large urban areas recruit others to travel to rural or coastal towns to sell Class A drugs for them.

The launch coincides with a Cheshire Constabulary-led operation this morning in which warrants were carried out across Merseyside and Cheshire, significant numbers of people were arrested. Other forces across the region will be carrying out publicity and operational activity to support TITAN's campaign.

Gangs typically use children and vulnerable adults to transport and/or deal drugs to customers. These victims are recruited using intimidation, deception, violence, debt bondage or grooming. During this process the 'victims' are likely to commit criminal offences.

The term 'County Lines' refers to the business model whereby a marketed mobile phone line known as 'the line' is used to order drugs for customers 24 hours a day.

Often the young people/ vulnerable adults that are exploited to deliver drugs have similar circumstances/ backgrounds and can include:

- Drug addicts/ drugs debts / drug experimentation (in younger children)
- Alcoholics or under-age drinking
- Mental health problems or learning difficulties
- In a relationship or friendship with a gang member
- Come from deprived backgrounds or broken families
- Young people who often go missing from home
- Young people who frequently skip school
- Looked after children/ under social services

The campaign is being developed to create a multi-agency approach which targets young people, parents, general public, care home staff, Merseyside Police officers/ staff, health care professionals and teachers to create a talking point about the signs and triggers of vulnerable adults and young people being exploited to deliver drugs, and the relevant reporting mechanisms.

Assistant Chief Constable Alan Barr, head of TITAN, said: “The issue of County Lines is becoming widespread across the region and further afield and by launching this campaign alongside all forces and partners we want to educate parents, teachers, carers and mental health professionals about how to identify some of the warning signs that vulnerable young people and adults are being used to deliver drugs and the ways you can report it to relevant agencies.

“We also want to reach out to those vulnerable people on how they can avoid becoming a target to these criminal groups and how to get help. Victims can be anyone in your community and criminal gangs will exploit vulnerability in all its forms to aid their activities.

“It can only be combatted if the public understand what it is, knows how to spot the signs and knows what to do if they think a person they know is being exploited.

“Intelligence from our communities is key to the police taking out the gangs responsible for this exportation of crime and exploitation of the vulnerable, so I would encourage anyone who has concerns about vulnerable people being targeted in this way to come forward and speak to us, either directly or anonymously through Crimestoppers.”

Who are the victims?

The victims can be anyone in your community – they can be as young as 10 or as old as 90 – criminal gangs exploit vulnerability in all its forms

- Young people may become trapped through experimental drug use or mixing with the wrong crowd and the building up of a drug debt
- Once in debt to a dealer they will be encouraged to sell drugs to pay the debt off

- The gang will ensure the debt is never fully paid off and the victim can quickly become trapped in a cycle where their only option is to commit further crime
- The more crime they commit the less likely they are to tell someone what is happening or seek help
- They will be dispatched to travel to other parts of the country where they are not known to police or social services and can essentially fly under the radar
- During this time away from home they are highly at risk of coming to further harm at the hands of people they are dealing to or rival local drug dealers
- Older people may become exploited to also traffick drugs, weapons and cash but additionally their homes might get taken over by gangs needing somewhere to hide drugs or deal from
- Adults with mental or physical disabilities, adults with addictions or adults who are particularly elderly may be suffering 'cuckooing' where a gang take over their home
- Other victims include the relatives of the exploited person who 'lose' their loved one to a criminal gang, and the communities where the drug dealing and associated violence is exported to

What are the signs?

In children, signs they are a victim of criminal exploitation can be:

- going missing from home or absent from school without explanation;
- mixing with new friends their parents don't know;
- experimental drug use, often cannabis;
- having more than one mobile phone;
- appearing nervous/scared/evasive/secretive;
- suffering injuries they can't explain; having tickets for train or coach travel

In adults, signs of 'cuckooing' can include:

- a loved one or neighbour not being seen for some time;
- unknown visitors and vehicles to their house at unusual times;
- exchanges of cash or packages outside their home;
- open drug use in the street; damage and degradation to the appearance of their home;
- a change in their own personality or behaviour e.g. used to say 'hi', now appears nervous/worried/intimidated

What are the police doing and how can the public help?

Local forces and Titan have joined together with Crimestoppers to raise awareness of the signs and symptoms to look out for and how the public can help by sharing information anonymously.

If people suspect it is occurring where they live they should pick up the phone and call Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111.