

Press release

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County Lines: a third of UK adults don't know what County Lines is; 38% would not know what to do if their child was involved – new figures

- **A third of parents (34%) would not feel confident spotting the signs if their child was being used for County Lines**
- **38% of parents would not know what to do if their/a child had become involved in County Lines**
- **New campaign aims to raise awareness of County Lines among adults and encourage them to get advice from the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline 08000 121 700**

A third (32%) of UK adults do not know what County Lines is, while more than half (53%) confess to little or no understanding of what it means, according to new research for anti-slavery charity Unseen.

About a third of parents (34%) would not feel confident spotting the signs if their/a child was being used for County Lines, while similar numbers (38%) would not know what to do if their/a child had become involved in County Lines, or feel confident about who to contact (37%).

The findings are part of a new campaign by Unseen to raise awareness of County Lines among parents, carers and other adults, and to encourage them to get help by contacting its Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline.

The research, conducted by poll group Opinium, comes amid a backdrop of growing numbers of children involved in modern slavery in the UK.¹ In 2020, nearly half (47%) of referrals to the Government National Referral Mechanism claimed they had been exploited as children.

“Modern slavery takes many forms, including child exploitation and County Lines exploitation involving children,” says Justine Currell, Executive Director of Unseen.

“Of all the types of modern slavery, we were shocked to see awareness of County Lines was by far the worst, with nearly one in five people (19%) saying they have never heard of it. This compares to two per cent having not heard of human trafficking, three per cent forced labour, and eight per cent not aware of domestic servitude.”

County Lines definition

County Lines describes the mobile phone lines used by criminal gangs to organise illegal drugs to be moved and sold from one village, town or city to another across the UK.

Children are most often used to move and sell the drugs. They are recruited by gang members who pose as friends and then trap the young people into a terrifying cycle of violence, exploitation and abuse.

Says Justine Currell: “The more that people understand the issues, how to spot the signs and where to go for help, the sooner we can reverse the growing numbers of children involved in modern slavery.

“Children caught up in County Lines are not criminals – they are victims of exploitation at the hands of organised criminal gangs.”

Joshua’s story

Emily’s son Joshuaⁱⁱ grew up near a small town in the UK and became involved in with a gang who were dealing drugs from what’s known as a “cuckoo” house (where the gang takes over the home of a vulnerable person).

Eventually Joshua was arrested, but was identified as a victim of modern slavery, and the case was dropped against him.

Says Emily: “Why do I think this all happened to my son? Yes, he has vulnerabilities, but to me, as his mum, he was the kid that never fitted in and then suddenly found he fitted in.

“I used to think kids who got involved with gangs were probably just naughty kids. But you don’t know anything until you’ve actually seen it yourself. They don’t stand a chance.”

Unseen’s research also found that UK adults think the most vulnerable to being recruited to County Lines in the UK are:

- Children from low economic backgrounds (55%)
- Children aged 12-15 years old (41%)
- Children from ethnic minority backgrounds (40%)

In fact, any child can be at risk.

When asked who should take responsibility for County Lines in the UK, three quarters of respondents (75%) felt it should be the police, with 55% saying the government, 42% family and 41% schools and education providers.

County Lines case study – how the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline can help

Daniel's story

Fiona noticed that her son Danielⁱⁱⁱ had started to change and was spending more time away from home. Daniel had started using drugs and had lost weight.

Eventually Daniel revealed to Fiona that he had been befriended by members of a gang who offered him alcohol and drugs. The gang members used this to create a “debt” that Daniel owed them. To pay off the debt Daniel was forced to sell drugs on behalf of the gang. If Daniel tried to leave them, the gang said they would track him down and cut off one of his limbs.

Daniel and Fiona were terrified, and Daniel was struggling to talk about what was happening to him. Fiona phoned the Helpline, and the team assessed that Daniel was a potential victim of criminal exploitation.

The Helpline advice to Fiona included information regarding the relevant powers^{iv} police could use to protect Daniel, the support he would be eligible for through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)^v and the statutory defence^{vi} under the Modern Slavery Act.

We also put Daniel and Fiona in touch with a charity who would be able to complete an NRM application so Daniel could get formal support.

Daniel was not ready to speak to the Helpline himself, but the Helpline continued to support him indirectly by assisting Fiona in helping her son move on.

Find out more about the campaign at:

www.unseenuk.org/county-lines (note this will not be going live until Thursday 24 June).

Please use the following hashtag in all social media:

#endchildexploitation

Notes to editors

For all press enquiries and expert quotes contact:

0303 040 2888

media@unseenuk.org

(Out of hours only: 07943 498239)

About Unseen:

Unseen is working towards a world without slavery. We provide safehouses and support in the community for survivors of trafficking and modern slavery. We also run the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline, and work with communities, business, governments, other charities and statutory agencies such as the police and NHS to stamp out slavery for good.

www.unseenuk.org

About the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline:

The Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline is part of Unseen. It runs 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, is free, confidential and available in more than 200 languages.

About the Opinium research

Research was conducted by Opinium from 1 to 4 June 2021 among 2,002 UK adults aged 18-plus. Results are weighted to nationally representative criteria.

ⁱ Government National Referral mechanism statistics

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/970995/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-statistics-end-year-summary-2020-hosb0821.pdf, page 3

ⁱⁱ Names have been changed to protect identities

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^{iv} More information at www.gov.uk/government/publications/slavery-and-trafficking-prevention-and-risk-orders

^v The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the Government system for recognising and supporting victims of modern slavery. www.childrenslegalcentre.com/resources/national-referral-mechanism/; www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-trafficking-victims-referral-and-assessment-forms/guidance-on-the-national-referral-mechanism-for-potential-adult-victims-of-modern-slavery-england-and-wales

^{vi} There is a section of the Modern Slavery Act called Section 45 Statutory Defence. This is a defence that can be used by a victim who is being charged with a crime that they were forced or compelled to commit due to their exploitation. More information at www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/section/45/enacted