

A close-up, profile shot of a Black man in a military uniform. He is wearing a dark grey baseball cap with a gold letter 'P' on the front. He is looking off to the left with a serious expression. He is wearing a tan military jacket with a dark grey hood and a shoulder strap. The background is dark and out of focus.

**GROOMING  
COUNTY LINES**

**SEN  
& THE VUNERABLE**



## Teenagers with autism are being targeted by gangs running county lines drugs operations.

Teenagers with autism are being targeted by gangs **running** county lines drugs operations. That's the view of youth worker Paul McKenzie, who has encountered “countless” examples of special needs teens recruited by older dealers. McKenzie says autistic youngsters' desire for friendship makes them easy prey.

Paul McKenzie: *Published: 8 August 2019*

[Source](#) Link

## Trapped in drugs underworld

Families are reluctant to turn their children over to the police. This can leave the children trapped in a drugs underworld.

McKenzie, 52, said: “We are seeing more and more children with special needs, especially autism, being targeted by county lines gangs because they don't fully understand the implications.”

He said the manipulation is a form of mate crime that “boils down to a basic human need” for friendship.

County lines operations see youngsters from cities trafficking drugs in smaller communities.

McKenzie, who works in London, sees older boys of around 18 and 19 targeting younger and more vulnerable teens. Their aim is to move the drugs from the capital to the rest of the UK.

The dealers later tell the boys they have debts to repay for the food

## How does it affect young people and vulnerable adults?

Like other forms of abuse and exploitation, county lines exploitation:

- can affect any child or young person (male or female) under the age of 18 years;
- can affect any vulnerable adult over the age of 18 years;
- can still be exploitation even if the activity appears consensual;
- can involve force and/or enticement-based methods of compliance and is often accompanied by violence or threats of violence;
- can be perpetrated by individuals or groups, males or females, and young people or adults; and is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the exploitation. Whilst age may be the most obvious, this power imbalance can also be due to a range of other factors including gender, cognitive ability, physical strength, status, and access to economic or other resources. One of the key factors found in most cases of county lines exploitation is the presence of some form of exchange (e.g. carrying drugs in return for something). Where it is the victim who is offered, promised or given something they need or want, the exchange can include both tangible (such as money, drugs or clothes) and intangible rewards (such as status, protection or perceived friendship or affection). It is important to remember the unequal power dynamic within which this exchange occurs and to remember that the receipt of something by a young person or vulnerable adult does not make them any less of a victim. It is also important to note that the prevention of something negative can also fulfil the requirement for exchange, for example a young person who engages in county lines activity to stop someone carrying out a threat to harm his/her family.

## Who is vulnerable to county lines exploitation?

The national picture on county lines continues to develop but there are recorded cases of:

- children as young as 12 years old being exploited or moved by gangs to courier drugs out of their local area; 15-16 years is the most common age range both males and females being exploited
- White British children being targeted because gangs perceive they are more likely to evade police detection but a person of any ethnicity or nationality may be exploited the use of social media to make initial contact with children and young people
- class A drug users being targeted so that gangs can takeover their homes (known as 'cuckooing'). We do know that county lines exploitation is widespread, with gangs from big cities including London, Manchester and Liverpool operating throughout England, Wales and Scotland. Gangs are known to target vulnerable children and adults; some of the factors that heighten a person's vulnerability include: having prior experience of neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse
- lack of a safe/stable home environment, now or in the past (domestic violence or parental substance misuse, mental health issues or criminality, for example)
- social isolation or social difficulties
- economic vulnerability
- homelessness or insecure accommodation status
- connections with other people involved in gangs
- having a physical or learning disability
- having mental health or substance misuse issues;
- being in care (particularly those in residential care and those with interrupted care histories)
- being excluded from mainstream education, in particular

## Vulnerability to exploitation

People with autism spectrum conditions may become victims of **mate crime**. Mate crime is a form of [hate crime](#) and occurs when someone uses their relationship with an individual to exploit and abuse them. They could be a friend, romantic partner, family member or support worker.

Mate crime can lead to many forms of exploitation including [financial exploitation and scams](#), [sexual exploitation](#) and being 'cuckooed' (having their property taken over by drug dealers or [county lines](#) gangs).

[Source Link](#)

People with autism spectrum conditions can be more vulnerable to exploitation because they may:

- have difficulty understanding social cues and communication, including difficulty recognising when the behaviour of others is concerning or inappropriate
- be very trusting and have a limited understanding of risk – people may not understand that those exploiting them may be telling lies or trying to deceive or manipulate them
- have difficulty telling others what is happening to them, especially if they have [communication difficulties](#)
- communicate of their distress through behavioural cues which might be assumed to relate to their impairment
- be viewed as easy targets – perpetrators assume it will be easy to lure or force them into an exploitative situation and assume that they will be unlikely to tell others what happened
- be overprotected and disempowered – they may not be used to making decisions or following their instincts and may have been sheltered from the outside world
- be viewed by society as 'different' and unable to live ordinary lives or have relationships – this can leave them unprepared to live independently, manage their finances or enter a romantic relationship
- feel isolated, which can make them vulnerable to [grooming](#) – this can include using the internet and social media to find friends, putting them at risk of online grooming
- receive care from support workers and family members, often in the home or specialist care settings – exploitation encountered in these settings is often hidden from view and can go unnoticed

# SIGNPOSTING



**A2ndvoice CIC**

— Autism . Ethnicity . Culture —

Are a small voluntary support group run by parents/carers living and caring for a child or adult on the Autistic Spectrum, raising awareness and understanding from different perspectives, outreaching also to the Africa, Caribbean, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities (ACAME) and Dual Heritage Communities in tackling the taboos and myths around Autism.

any practitioner working with a vulnerable person who they think may be at risk of county lines exploitation should follow their local safeguarding guidance and share this information with local authority social services. If you believe a person is in immediate risk of harm, you should contact the police.

