

Victim stories of County Lines drug dealing



Trap house in Gloucestershire. Pic credit: Gloucestershire Police

County Lines is an ever-growing issue that can have a devastating impact on the lives of vulnerable adults and children, and which poses a significant threat to our communities. This type of behaviour will not be tolerated and we need your help to put a stop to it.

Right now, gangs based in cities like London are targeting the most vulnerable people in our towns and making them sell Class A drugs on their behalf.

They are also taking over the homes of vulnerable people – those who may be addicted to drugs, feeling vulnerable, isolated or suffering from mental health issues – to use them as a base for drug dealing. This activity is known as 'Cuckooing'. The victims are often kept in the property against their will, manipulated and subjected to violence, exploitation and abuse. The consequences of 'cuckooing' can be far-reaching and life altering.

John is a 54-year-old addict who suffers from mental health issues and lives alone. A year ago, County Lines drug dealers took over his home and imprisoned him in his own bedroom for six weeks.

"It all started when I met a homeless person who was desperate for a place to stay, so I offered him a bed for a couple of nights. I didn't know he was a local drug dealer with connections to other dealers outside of the area. This man let two dealers from London into my home and it all spiralled out of my control from then on.

"They are very clever you know. They know what they are doing. I am an addict, you know, and once they were in my house it was impossible to get them to leave. They would always tell me they are staying just one more day. They would offer me crack cocaine and heroin in exchange for staying longer. It is very difficult to say no when you're an addict. Eventually one day turned into a week, which turned into a month. I felt helpless and thought they would never leave.

"They were very manipulative. There was a constant threat of violence. They would leave weapons lying around the house so that you would know they would get violent if you didn't do what you wanted. People would come and go all the time. I don't think any of them could have been older than 18.

"The first time this happened, I eventually realised I needed to get help to get these people out of my home and so I called my support worker who in turn called the police. The police came round and knocked on my door, which was enough to scare the dealers who fled quite quickly.

"By then though, local dealers had realised that I live alone, suffer from mental health issues and that I am addict. They saw me as an easy target. The second time County Lines drug dealers took over my home was because I was trying to help a girl who emotionally blackmailed me into letting her stay in my spare room. She claimed she needed a permanent address to claim benefits and to be able to see her kids, so I let her in. The same thing happened again. She let other dealers into my home.

"This is when I started dealing in order to support my drug habit and was eventually arrested on the street. The police asked me if I had anyone in my house, and I said "Yes". They took my keys and gained access to my property. This time round arrests were made and the dealers have not returned for over a year now.

"The experience has completely changed my life. I have a support system in place and I am working with a support worker on my addiction issues, but I mostly keep myself to myself and I don't trust anyone anymore.

"The police have been amazing. The local team stop by every week to make sure I am ok and that I don't have any unwanted guests. They have all been incredibly understanding of my situation and have always offered help. I am very grateful for everything they have done."

Peter is in his 70s and lives in a retirement bungalow. He lives alone and was vulnerable and lonely when he was targeted by a County Lines dealer.

"Over a year ago now, I befriended someone in a local coffee shop. They approached me very casually and I just started chatting to them. One thing led to another and I invited him round to my house to visit. Then they started staying the odd night and the next thing I knew they had taken over my home. They left me in a dreadful situation and brought a load of unpleasantness into my home.

"The name he gave me was not his real name, and he lied about his age, telling me he was older than he was. But, I took it on face value. He was a very charming person who took advantage of the fact that I was a bit lonely and a bit vulnerable.

"I think it was peer pressure. I think there were people above him that were putting pressure on him to find a base. He was on and off here for a few weeks before the police got involved.

"They were selling drugs. Not from my home, they were just using my home as a base. I didn't see much of the drugs being stored here but after they were arrested I came across some wraps hidden inside my boiler in my kitchen. I called the police and they took them away. I don't know what they were but they went.

"The whole time they were here I was very stressed out and very anxious. I guess I was vulnerable and allowed them to take over.

"I live on the outskirts of the town centre, which is not at all where you would expect this kind of thing to happen. I think I have learnt to be much more cautious. I don't have anybody in my home now other than the neighbours around here. No one else comes into my home.

"My advice to anyone vulnerable or who lives alone is to always be careful about who you have in your home and befriend".

Kim is in her 50s and was cuckooed by drug dealers from London. They violently attacked her and left her unconscious in her flat for three days before she was found.

"I was an active drug addict at the time. You get these groups from London who target vulnerable older women who live alone. I think I was the third woman in my town to go through this.

"I had six weeks of texts leading up to it. Saying things like "check under your bed" and "look in your cupboards", or "it's a scary place for a woman your age". I didn't think anything of it but after six weeks it really started to freak me out. One day, five guys just walked in through the back door and took over my home.

"Eventually they did go. But, when they left they breeze blocked all my windows and smashed the whole flat up, beat me up, kicked me in the back and broke two of my vertebrae. I ended up being in hospital for three months.

"They even followed me to the hospital. It's not like it used to be and things have changed a lot, you know. Taking drugs used to be much lower key. Now, there's a lot more violence, weapons, knives, machetes, and you can't tell anyone what is going on because you're frightened to death.

"It was like Armageddon when they came round and blocked my windows. After I got beaten up, I thought I was going to die. I was in there for three days unconscious. Then I ended up in hospital. My son found me with his boss. They broke down the door and came in.

"People give your number out and they target you through your phone. They targeted me because I am an older woman, with no man, no grown up children. I was alone. They came back once after they left but the police got rid of them really quickly. There were arrests.

"The police in have been constant. They were the ones who moved me to my new home and saved my life. They check on me regularly now and I have the officers' numbers I can ring. I don't answer the door unless I see the police uniforms now.

"These people will offer money or drugs, they will dangle a big carrot. They operate on pure intimidation. It's absolutely horrible. I have never been a victim and it was horrible to be subjected to that constant fear factor all the time".

Lydia is in her 60s and an ex addict who became an easy target for County Lines drug dealers.

"My troubles with County Lines drug dealers started at the beginning of last year when strangers forced their way into my home, took control of my life, and started dealing drugs from my house. They threatened me and even took my house key.

"Police were called to my house after my neighbours noticed a lot of activity happening around my front door with people coming and going at all hours. When the officers came to investigate, I told them everything. They caught one of the dealers quite quickly but the other managed to escape. Before they found and arrested the second dealer, I was scared of leaving my house in case I bumped into him and avoided going into town at all cost. But, I did receive regular visits from officers who came to make sure I was ok. When the police found and arrested him, I was able to start trying to move on with my life.

"I want to speak out now because I have heard that these people are using 12, 13, 14 year olds to do their work. It is disgusting and it has to stop. I hope that talking about my experience will help people understand how awful this problem is and how important it is to talk to the police so they can help put a stop to it.

"I owe my life to the officers who came to my door that day. I would not be here without them. I live by myself now and am very lucky to have survived lockdown with my trusty dog. We have been able to re-discover the beautiful countryside together, something that would not have been possible without Avon and Somerset Police."

Drug dealers will often take over the homes of vulnerable people who may also be addicted to drugs, and use it as a base to deal drugs in the area. The vulnerable person may be being kept inside against their will.

- Have you noticed more people calling or staying at an address? Sometimes at unsociable hours?
- Have you noticed a neighbour has not been seen for a while?
- Are there suspicious smells coming from an address?
- Are there suspicious or unfamiliar vehicles outside the address?
- Are there new or regularly changing residents (e.g. different accent compared to local accent)?

Cuckooing could be taking place.

Look out for your neighbours and report suspicions anonymously online to Crimestoppers or by calling 0800 555 111. Alternatively you can call the police on 101. If you think someone is at immediate risk of harm, always call 999.