



THE IMPACT OF COUNTY LINES EXPLOITATION ON SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN UK COMMUNITIES

Summary:

The interconnecting dynamics of economic, political, and developmental fractures exert a profound influence on the educational landscape for children and young people, adopting an environment where criminalised-employment, drug culture, and social disorganisation become desensitised. Such normalisations perpetuate adverse societal consequences, impacting society and businesses on a broader scale. The phenomenon of county lines not only undermines the fundamental pillars of social cohesion but also obstructs the cultivation of skilled, productive workforces essential for sustained economic growth and development. Acknowledging the importance of social sustainability becomes imperative to drive forward and generate human capital, thereby creating opportunities for progression within our society, particularly for young people who represent the future pillars of societal advancement. The term 'County Lines' describes the developing distribution process of the drug trade across the UK. Offenders use mobile phones to set up drug businesses. This process also consists of exploiting vulnerable children to work for them.

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Introduction

Sustainability, stemming from the 1987 Brundtland report, initially aimed at future generations' welfare in economic development. Though centred on critical environmental concerns and human resource development (United Nations, 1987a), the term has lately been synonymous with climate change, encompassing broader actions for sustainability. A holistic view, anchored in social, economic, and ecological pillars, highlights their interconnectedness for impactful outcomes (University of Alberta, 2014). This thesis seeks to address the following research question: What economic, management, political and technological factors contribute to the sustainable normalisation of criminalised management and employment among the youth? This inquiry aims to identify and analyse the elements that influence young individuals' involvement in illicit activities, examining the systemic and structural aspects that perpetuate this phenomenon. The research question is focused on county lines exploitation, also known as child criminal exploitation (GOV.UK, 2023b), this paper seeks practical solutions to reduce youth criminal behaviours, instil a learning-centric mindset, and advocate collaboration for social development in communities. This effort seeks to enhance understanding regarding the factors that attract young individuals, including graduates, towards engaging in criminal employment, thereby creating an adverse alternative to conventional labour market participation. The SDGs will serve as a blueprint to propose and generate a prevention, intervention, and reintegration (P.I.R) model, (Nash, 2023) to advocate for incorporating social stability and development in youngsters. This paper aims to integrate the SDG framework within the context of CL to advance the UN 2030 agenda for human and sustainable development. This entails supporting the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects that adopt safe, just, and sustainable societies while challenging harmful initiatives and resisting political misuse (United Nations, 2022). Achieving this requires a comprehensive understanding of CL's methodologies, which normalise criminalised employment, impacting the economy, society, and legality, and exacerbating economic burdens.

The paper is divided into five sections. Section 1, "County Lines Introduction," presents CL terminology, addresses the complexity of the drug supply and trade in the UK, and evaluates business strategies used in CL. Section 2, "Discussion," compares legitimate business and CL operations, focusing on management, employment approaches, and business development. Section 3 details the methodology used for data extraction. Section 5, "Preliminary Findings," discusses primary themes and the normalisation of criminalised employment. Section 6, concludes the paper, outlining opportunities for future research.

County Lines Introduction

The term "County Lines" (CL) describes a dynamic business, distribution, and management model within the UK's drug market, centred on the use of mobile phone lines for nationwide drug sales. CL operations are characterised by the use of violence, threats, coercion, deception, and sexual exploitation to intimidate, motivate, and reward vulnerable individuals including children and adults, into drug businesses (National Crime Agency, 2017). While drug crime groups have a historical presence in the UK (Downes, 1995), CL stands out due to its adaption of legitimate business models and practices, such as just-in-time delivery provided on a gig economy model (Nash, 2023). This involves the recruitment and management of vulnerable individuals, including children as young as seven, to transport, exchange, and receive payment for drugs (NCA, 2017).

In recent years, the exploitation of CL has emerged at the forefront of public discourse in the UK, raising significant concerns about its impact on social sustainability within local communities (House of Commons, 2024). CL drug businesses potentially provide an alternative regulatory regime for individuals in specific localities. The management and employment regime within CL may appear to offer greater sustainability for local labour and their families than opportunities provided by the local economy or the state. This research paper aims to analyse and critically evaluate this phenomenon as a form of criminalised management strategy and criminalised employment, where management strategies mimic those found in the legitimate economy. This approach aims to illuminate the effects and potential implications of CL for social cohesion and welfare. By examining the factors contributing to CL and its consequences for individuals, families, and communities, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of this pressing issue and to offer data and recommendations for policy development.

For instance, the diffusion and presence of CL businesses represent an alternative regulatory regime and associated management structure that may restrict the conventional discourse on sustainability to specific segments of the population. CL has unsurprisingly garnered interest within the academic community. Initial studies employ traditional interpretative and sociological perspectives to understand the phenomenon of CL, focusing primarily on the personal lives of those involved and the threat they pose to society. This paper, however, adopts a sustainable lens, enhancing the quality of research by emphasising the importance of social development to better safeguard vulnerable children and young people. It proposes ethical prevention, intervention, and reintegration (P.I.R model); (Nash, 2023) mechanisms to provide social protection from drug criminality.

This study integrates the ‘situational precipitators of crime’ theory from environmental criminology and the ‘motivation’ theory rooted in entrepreneurship. Additionally, it pioneers the integration of sustainability and environmental criminology within the CL context, proposing socially sustainable strategies to safeguard the youth and mitigate youth offending and drug-related crimes in the UK. The research also explores leveraging the SDGs for the effective protection of children and young people, promoting their growth and development through legitimate opportunities such as education and employment. The relationship between the criminal application of management strategies and criminalised employment is complex. It encompasses coercive and exploitative contexts, including the supply of unlawful goods or services such as firearms, drugs, counterfeit goods, and individuals trafficked for bonded work in various illicit industries. Innovations in criminalised businesses, such as just-in-time supply on a gig economy model, inform new patterns of criminalised employment, including line managers and drug runners. Spicer (2019) highlights the importance of branding and business models in this sector, while Coomber and Moyles (2018) discuss broader regulatory changes in drug businesses.

Finally, criminalised employment includes trafficked individuals misled into domestic servitude without contracts, often as modern slaves. The complexity of this relationship raises ethical considerations in researching the criminal application of legitimate business strategies and interacting with those involved in criminal activity. Such research is justified by the need to provide a comprehensive picture of issues like sustainability and business entrepreneurship, which cannot be fully understood without studying these illicit practices.

Discussion

The economic costs associated with CL operations have significantly impacted society. The UK Government's 10-year drugs strategy, initiated in 2019 with an initial investment of £65m, has been augmented by an additional £145m from December 2021 to December 2024 (GOV.UK, 2023a). Although this programme has facilitated the closure of 5,627 drug enterprises and resulted in 16,536 arrests since 2019 (GOV.UK, 2024), the economic impact on society remains substantial due to insufficient support programmes for at-risk children and young people. While some awareness-raising initiatives exist, many children are still drawn to criminal employment due to the allure of easy money and accessible illicit opportunities (Nash, 2023). Legitimate opportunities often have more restrictions and requirements, which can be demotivating for young people, particularly those from lower and working-class backgrounds who may lack the necessary skills and qualifications for well-paid jobs. Additionally, recent data indicates that children from the middle and upper class are increasingly targeted due to factors such as emotional neglect, adverse childhood experiences, and a lack of self-belonging.

The impact of CL extends beyond law enforcement and judicial expenses to include indirect costs such as healthcare, social services, and lost productivity. Although specific statistics on these costs are lacking, the allocated funding to combat illegal drugs underscores the national effort to safeguard communities. However, this funding is insufficient to dismantle CLs, as the illegal drug trade remains a thriving enterprise, with individual businesses generating over £800,000 annually and the industry as a whole exceeding £800m annually (GOV.UK, 2023a). The continued demand for drugs and the availability of children willing to take risks perpetuate the cycle of illegal enterprises. Effective intervention requires targeted programmes aimed at drug users, at-risk children, and rehabilitation for those involved in CL operations. The untaxed revenue generated by drug businesses fuels further criminal activities and undermines legitimate businesses, negatively affecting the local and national economy. While this research does not support the legalisation of drugs due to potential negative consequences such as increased addiction, premature deaths, social disorganisation, and higher crime rates as evidenced by situations in Amsterdam (Krever and Orie, 2023) and the US (Phillips, 2023) it emphasises the need for comprehensive intervention strategies to address the root problems of the drug supply market.

According to the UN SDGs, social sustainability encompasses meeting present and future needs without compromising health, well-being, gender equality, poverty, education, work, dignity, justice, and other developmental factors (United Nations, 2023a). For businesses, addressing these elements for internal stakeholders can positively impact external stakeholders, including communities. Social development is intrinsically linked to economic and environmental growth; its absence leads to unsustainable economies and environments (Galea et al., 2017). The modern business environment highlights the necessity of social development to prevent ethical failures that could result in business collapse. Elkington (1999) describes a paradigm shift that goes beyond traditional accounting, advocating for a comprehensive approach in corporate strategies encompassing environmental, economic, and societal aspects. A firm commitment to social sustainability addresses employees' needs, as outlined in Maslow's hierarchy (1943), and protects their morals, integrity, and rights, which in turn, enhances revenue, economic growth, job creation, and future employment opportunities. Gunaseelan and Ollukkaran (2012) emphasise that a positive internal business environment significantly boosts employee performance and productivity, thereby affecting profitability. Similarly, just as surroundings influence communities and work productivity, CL negatively impacts young people's environments, adopting conditions conducive to criminal behaviour.

CL is driven by multiple factors, including the availability of illegal drugs in urban areas, which attracts criminal networks (NCA, 2019). Economic downturns and rising unemployment in certain regions heighten individuals' vulnerability to exploitation by criminal groups (Marcus & Gavrilovic, 2010; Windle et al., 2020). The lack of effective prevention and intervention programmes, combined with insufficient support systems for vulnerable individuals, exacerbates this issue. CL significantly impacts social development within communities. Organised criminal activities disrupt social cohesion, undermine trust among neighbours, and erode residents' well-being. The associated violence and intimidation create a climate of fear, reducing community participation (Nash, 2023). Moreover, the presence of illicit drugs and criminal activities increases crime rates and street gang presence, worsening social tensions.

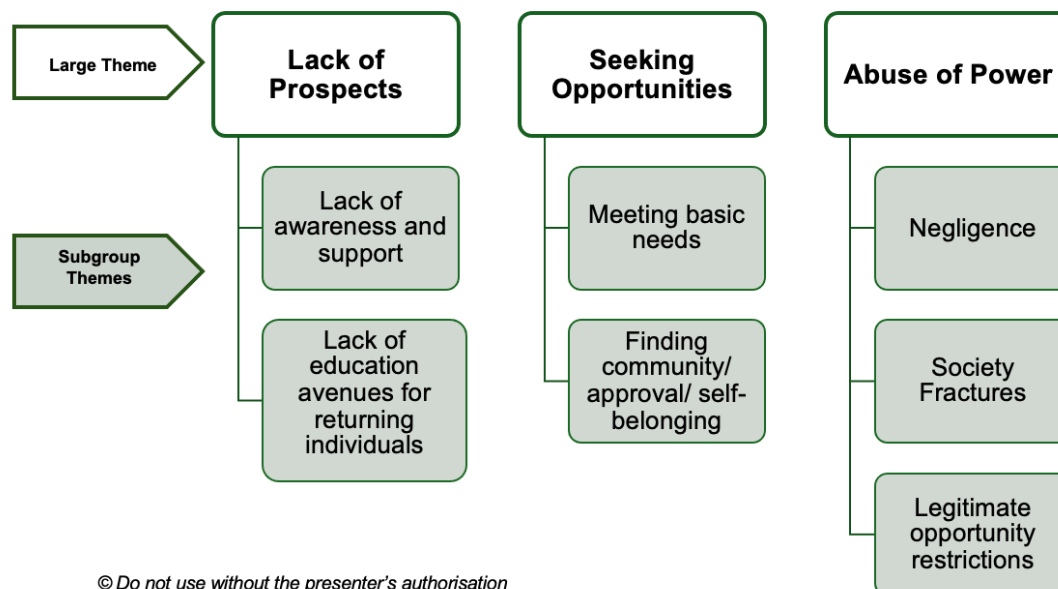
CL has profound consequences for individuals and families, affecting their well-being and future prospects. Young, vulnerable individuals lacking education and employment opportunities are often recruited into drug distribution networks (Moyle, 2019; Catch22, 2021), although we are now seeing a shift in the targeted demographic group (Nash, 2023). Their involvement leads to exposure to violence, addiction, and imprisonment, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and social isolation. For families, the emotional and financial strain of a loved one's involvement in criminal activities can be devastating, resulting in strained relationships, financial difficulties, including debt bondage, and lost community trust (Harvard, 2022; Maxwell et al., 2019). Addressing CL requires a collaborative approach involving local authorities, social services, businesses, and educational institutions to implement effective prevention measures and community restoration. CL's impact on education is significant, disrupting positive knowledge-sharing essential for development and hindering the formation of skilled future workforce. Students diverted from studies due to fear, associated risks, and financial pressure face poor educational outcomes. Limited access to quality education in marginalised communities further deprives children involved in CL of necessary knowledge and skills, ultimately obstructing skill development and career growth. By working together, supportive communities can be created, offering resources and opportunities such as membership programmes, career development, and recreational activities. The exploitation of CL poses significant challenges to social development in communities. Organised crime networks, driven by illicit drug supply and socioeconomic factors, disrupt social cohesion and undermine individual and family well-being (Govindharaj & Kareem, 2024; Gill et al., 2017; Singer, 2008; United Nations, 1997). Examining the factors contributing to CL and its impact on social development underscores the need for proactive and collaborative approaches embedded in the SDGs. Only through collaboration can safer, and more resilient communities be created.

Advancing the literature on CL is crucial for understanding the methodologies adopted by drug dealers. It also aids in developing strategies to prevent the recruitment of children and young people into these criminal networks. By implementing appropriate and legitimate opportunities and recruitment methods, we can improve the quality, cohesion, and safety of our communities, contributing to the broader goals of peace and security derived from SDG 16. Aligning these strategies with the UN 2030 agenda for sustainable development provides a framework for creating tailored prevention and reintegration protocols. These protocols aim to build safe, just, and sustainable communities, ensuring that efforts to combat CL also contribute to global human and sustainable development outcomes, and minimise the progression of criminalised employment in the UK.

Methodology

The data extracted for this research employs a qualitative data methodology, specifically a narrative structure. The study utilises an empirical research approach through face-to-face interviews to gather information essential for addressing the research aim. The investigation focuses on individuals with lived experiences of drug involvement at different levels in the drug hierarchy, employing semi-structured and open-ended questions to explore their journeys and motivations for engaging in criminal activities. The research design adheres to an interpretive-constructivist paradigm, underlining the belief that each participant's truth is intricately tied to their lived experiences and the environmental factors (Bless et al, 2004) shaping their involvement in criminality. The collected data is systematically organised and coded based on emerging common themes (see diagram 1). Notably, these themes align closely with the central theme of this paper, which scrutinises the fractures in social sustainability and development, elucidating the dynamics contributing to social disorganisation and lack of cohesion within communities.

Diagram 1 – Primary Themes Developed from Data



Preliminary Findings

Diagram 1 illustrates the primary and emerging themes regarding the impact of CL on employment prospects, family dynamics, progression barriers, and social development. The qualitative data analysis employed both, deductive and inductive approaches, integrating theories from criminology and entrepreneurship studies. This enabled a nuanced understanding of CL hierarchy and the behaviours of those involved. Themes emerged exclusively from participant interviews, revealing that engagement in CL often resulted from a lack of prospects for academically struggling individuals or those from complex backgrounds. Participants from middle to upper-class backgrounds cited alienation and lack of community as drivers for CL involvement. Robinson's (2019) study highlights trauma and criminal outcomes but often overlooks young people's view of CL as legitimate employment, which this paper aims to address to add value to the literature available on CL.

Participants noted that involvement in CL yielded higher income than minimum wage jobs. Legitimate work was seen as demotivating due to long hours, lower pay, and higher taxes, leading to financial inadequacy. However, those at the lower levels of the hierarchy faced significant exploitation, often earning only minimum wage, and being underpaid, akin to modern slavery. Recent data shows a shift in CL operations, with offenders offering fixed salaries to runners, ensuring more consistent pay than the previous zero-hour contract model. CL attracts individuals in various ways, but exploitation and negative repercussions remain constant. Data highlights the complexities behind criminal activity participation, emphasising the exposure to violence, drugs, and exploitation. This involvement impairs cognitive and emotional development, hindering skill acquisition. Long-term consequences include higher unemployment rates and limited opportunities, impeding economic growth (Adamu, 2006). To mitigate these effects, focusing on social sustainability and developmental factors is crucial. Early intervention programmes and targeted support can divert vulnerable children from criminal activities. Creating inclusive learning environments, addressing educational needs, promoting positive relationships and leadership, and enhancing awareness are essential to preventing CL-related challenges and adopting cohesive communities.

Linking these themes to the SDGs underscores the need to understand factors driving youth crime and connects to the UN 2030 agenda, affirming that “there are no SDGs without peace and no peace without SDGs” (United Nations, 2023b). Interview participants felt rejected and failed by society and professionals due to inadequate funding for children and family services (Local Council Representative, personal communication, 2022). This neglect has led to deprived communities, fewer youth centres, limited summer activities, inadequate work experience opportunities, and a lack of intellectual and skills development, creating an uninspired generation likely to perpetuate this cycle. To achieve sustainability, we must educate, train, and invest in our citizens, preparing them for a developed world. While building sustainable businesses is crucial for future employment, addressing social development within our communities is essential for developing future leaders.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to address the research question: What economic, management, political and technological factors contribute to the sustainable normalisation of criminalised management and employment among youth? By identifying and analysing the elements influencing young individual’s involvement in illicit activities, examining the systemic and structural aspects that perpetuate this phenomenon. This paper addresses CL-related issues by exposing legitimate business and marketing methodologies embedded in illegal drug enterprises, which fracture UK communities and normalise management and criminalised employment among youth, thereby discouraging legitimate opportunities and leading to labour exploitation. It cultivates a comprehensive understanding of the evolving CL model and its participants by examining the environments that shape criminal culture. It scrutinises CL through a sustainable lens, offering solutions for social development, enhancing safeguarding, and promoting social cohesion.

This research identifies significant gaps, addressing social fractures affecting holistic sustainability across businesses, the economy, and ecology. It compares CL enterprises with legitimate businesses, mapping CL’s evolving strategies, and contributing to a conceptual framework for responsive and preventative interventions in the dynamic drug market. The paper calls for future research on complications such as drug legalisation and its impact on climate change and communities, applying environmental criminology and sustainability methodologies. Unlike most CL literature, which focuses on policing and safeguarding, this

paper integrates business, entrepreneurship, and criminology theories, supported by the SDGs, to develop a robust plan for future policy development. It assists policymakers in re-evaluating CL, allocating appropriate support, minimising the criminalisation of innocent youth, and creating programmes that adopt social development and sustainability for stronger, safer, and more peaceful communities.

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