12. Reframing ‘place leadership’: an analysis of leadership in responding to the wicked issue of county lines and criminality within a context of post-pandemic public health policing

Joyce Liddle and Gareth Addidle

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores a practical approach to place leadership within the context of county lines, acknowledged as an escalating wicked problem. This type of criminal activity takes place within complicated landscapes, as multi-agency leaders, including police leaders, seek innovative policy interventions based on dialogue and relational approaches. Recent evidence on the scale of vulnerable individuals and groups inhabiting so-called ‘left-behind’ places offers useful data to explore this 21st century social policy problem (Addidle and Liddle, 2020). Additionally, many competing and contradictory conceptualisations of the concept of vulnerability present place leaders with dilemmas on how to prioritise, operationalise and respond to such criminal activity (Addidle and Liddle, 2020). Extant literature on place leadership remains largely at the economic level of analysis, but a growing body of work has added to our understanding of the social contexts of place leadership within the public realm. Our key aim in this chapter is to add theoretical, empirical and policy insights to existing understandings, with a specific focus on crime and county lines. The National Crime Agency (NCA) (2016) in the United Kingdom (UK) defines ‘county lines’ as the mobile phone lines used to market the illicit sales of primarily class A drugs. According to their definition, it is a phenomenon that specifically exploits vulnerable people, including both children and adults. It encourages their engagement in drug and weapon trafficking to other provincial areas (NCA, 2016), along with the movement of money and securing premises to facilitate sales (NCA, 2017).

Over the past ten years there has been a concerted effort to manage ‘places’ across England by strengthening local leadership, and the current mayoral model owes much to United States (US) mayoral experience, rather than more traditional European mayoral models of governance. In England (and the UK more broadly) the central state remains heavily involved in the details of local decision-making, to an extent that would have been unthinkable in the US. However, since the first tentative steps towards a more US-style approach to leading and managing city regions and their

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hinterlands, a very complex system of city governance has evolved, with some led by an elected mayor and others without an elected mayor. These complex governance arrangements at city region level represent a shift from traditional local government towards the adoption of more 'entrepreneurial governance', requiring state officials to work more closely with non-state, business, third and voluntary sector partners to drive economic and social change. Mayoral governance has been a major plank in the UK central government plans for stimulating economic growth and business development in order to reduce regional inequalities. Moreover, after a BREXIT deal had been agreed, the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnston was eager to make 'levelling up' his flagship policy for 2021, because regional disparities were widening. Attempts to rebalance the UK economy are not new, and many 'left-behind' places were already suffering from socio-economic decline prior to COVID-19. Bringing levelling up and mayoral governance together, in respect of policing, we can see the politicisation of policing taking a further step beyond areas which have police and crime commissioners (PCCs) (non-combined areas), to combined authorities with mayoral arrangements. For example, in West Yorkshire Combined Authority, in 2023 Alison Lowe the Deputy Mayor has responsibility for policing and crime.

The year 2020 was an extraordinary year for public services as police forces recruited an additional 20 000 police officers, the health service recruited more nurses and doctors, and there was cautious optimism that austerity might be drawing to a close. However, this chapter shows that COVID-19 forced place leaders to overcome historical and professional differences and merge understandings of what constitutes the public interest and the common good. In determining what these terms mean, each leader has differing engagement, categorisation and assessment of vulnerability, safeguarding basic human rights and risk, governed by international European and national statutory requirements. Moreover, each leader's responsibilities and values are shaped by their own professional culture and standards of behaviour, but in the case of the police they also have a statutory duty to prevent and detect crime.

Policing county lines is very complex and demands mobilisation of a wide variety of people and publics, where conflict and contestation of interests will be evident. All actors must continually share tacit knowledge, and read the rapidly changing contexts, people and situations. Those involved, especially first responders, must engage in sense-making to understand how others are interpreting, reading and framing situations differently, as in any given situation both context and challenges can escalate rapidly. Challenges arise in tackling crime and county lines where young people at risk of potential harm may need to be removed from a harmful scenario, as well as being signposted to relevant welfare agencies for further support. Multi-agency place-based approaches offer significant opportunities for innovative relational and dialogic leadership in the public interest, as the remainder of this chapter shows.

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PLACE-BASED AND PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

Many Western governments have long been seeking answers to the problems of economic downturn, financial constraints and social disintegration; all of which were exacerbated during COVID-19. As spaces for policy intervention continue to be squeezed through reduced budgets, place leaders are forced to work more collaboratively in partnership across sectoral boundaries to rethink future strategies (Liddle, 2010, 657–664). Leadership of place has become a crucial factor in any potential transformation, as not only can it can overcome economic and social isolationism (Beer et al., 2019, 171–182; Bowden and Liddle, 2018, 145–155; Sotarauta, 2016), but it can also allow leaders to think globally and act locally. Solving a multitude of wicked issues facing communities becomes an imperative in enhancing the quality of life for citizens, as the following quotation confirms:

> Any economic repercussions from COVID-19 and other environmental forces present place leaders with major challenges across all public sector systems such as transport, education and other local issues, but also presents opportunities to think systemically within a highly inter-connected world to identify the vulnerable and ensure the future resilience of places. (Marvin Reeve, BAME Mayor of Bristol, in Hambleton, 2020, 1)

Hambleton (2020) calls for the voices of those who comprehend the true nature of ‘wickedness’ to be heard, in the belief that a central government acknowledgement of the power of place will achieve more effective policies by directing resources at the different needs of different people, in different places. His civic leadership model is introduced in Figure 12.1, adapted to contextualise this chapter’s findings on county lines, and to illustrate how place-based action can be used to re-frame such a wicked issue, and to highlight the need for innovative practices, novel institutional responses and relational dialogue in addressing them. Figure 12.1 is examined in more detail later in the chapter to show how multi-agency leaders engage more fully in relational dialogue to undertake place-based approaches to safeguarding vulnerable young people drawn into county lines criminality.

The literature on both public and place leadership within networks and partnerships has grown over the past few years, and many writers were conscious that analyses of ‘heroic’ individuals inspiring followers became problematic, as mainstream leadership literature rarely reflected the diversity of leaders from public, private and civic spheres (in places and spaces) working together across organisational boundaries to solve common problems (Liddle, 2010, 657–664; Liddle, 2018a, 145–155). Traditional leadership models have now been replaced by facilitative and adaptive forms of leadership, embedded in the everyday relationally responsive dialogic practices of leaders who feel morally accountable to others for their actions. In the world of crime and county lines there is a strong case for continually investing in dialogue across boundaries, both physical and imagined (Gibney et al., 2021, 1596–1608).

There is a resurgence of interest in places and territories in social scientific discourse, not only from the perspective of economic development but also increasingly

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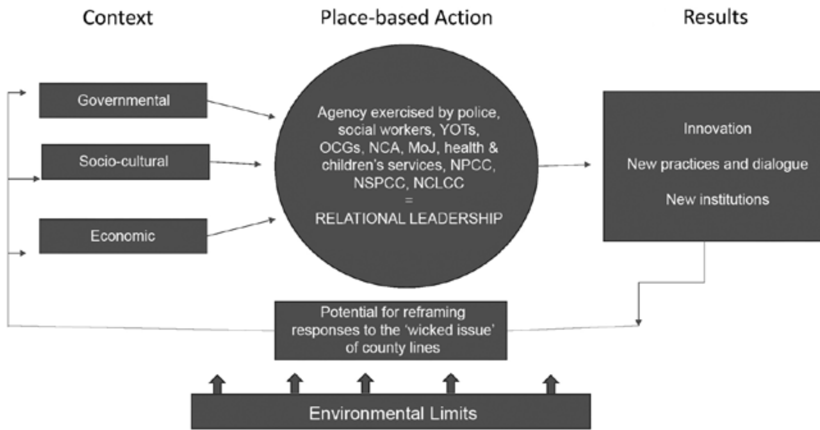

Note: NCA – National Crime Agency; MoJ – Ministry of Justice; NPCC – National Police Chiefs' Council; NSPCC – National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children; YOT – Youth Offending Team; NCLCC – National County Lines Co-ordination Centre; OCG – Organised Crime Group.
Source: Adapted from Hambleton (2020).

Figure 12.1 Place-based action

focused on 'social well-being' (Liddle et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is an evolving body of research on public leadership and enterprise (Pugalis and Liddle, 2014; Liddle, 2010, 2018a; 't Hart, 2014), multi-disciplinary place leadership (Sotarauta et al., 2012), vital and sustainable leadership (Horlings et al., 2019), addressing urban violence in achieving United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Knight et al., 2020). New Public Leadership (Brookes, 2008), and Hartley's (2018) recent work on public leadership, have added to the debate. All writers generally accept that leadership is critical to the growth and the social and economic health of places (Beer and Clower, 2014, 5–20; Sotarauta et al., 2017, 187–193) but the re-insertion of agency has enabled deeper examination of what people actually do to influence other people, formally and informally, in particular settings.

Places are products of complex constellations of varied and dense social relationships that combine contingently in specific time–space couplings, and traditionally, until recently, 'public leadership' within places was conceptualised by examining either individuals in possession of formal authority in government and public services, or elected and appointed officials at a variety of government levels (Van Wart, 2013, 521–543; Brookes and Grint, 2010; Hartley, 2018, 202–217). However, 'government' has been replaced by a broader definition to encapsulate the complexities of 'governance', and includes non-state actors and the wider public interest, or how, within the public realm (Kellerman and Webster, 2001, 485–514), social and public value is determined, or the public good is achieved (Crosby and Bryson, 2018,

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1265–1286; Liddle, 2021). Public leadership can be discernible from agents of the state, the market and/or civil society, but changing governance contexts in many societies, including multi-level governance (Liddle, 2018b, 485–514), mean that a focus solely on state actors and state processes is insufficient to understand how public leaders interact with non-state leaders within places.

Leadership has often been the missing factor in attempting to understand uneven economic and social development (Pike and Tomaney, 2009, 13–34; Rodriguez-Pose, 2013, 1034–1047). Contemporary debates have focused on the importance of place leadership in mobilising and leading processes that allow for the transformation and sustainable renewal and renaissance of 'deprived' localities; those in need of 'levelling-up' within UK settings in the recent past (Tomaney and Pike, 2019, 43–48). Place-shaping is also 'the creative use of powers and influence to promote the general well-being of a community and its citizens' (Diamond, 2020, 1). It has waxed and waned over the years, but returned firmly to the UK national policy conversation since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The importance of place reflects not only a set of policy interventions and local government responsibilities, but also offers a unique lens for analysing how place leaders prioritise what matters to citizens (Diamond, 2020).

Hartley (2018, 202–217) sees the public realm as a focus for decision-making to achieve social and public value across a variety of actors and processes. However, the public realm includes imprecise formal and informal governance arrangements, and each agent has a differing understanding of what constitutes the public interest and the common good. Conflict and contestation mean that place leaders need to synthesise a myriad of contradictory forces and respond to the politics of the situation, as well as acknowledging diversity, dilemmas, competing voices and agendas (Liddle, 2010, 657–664). Liddle (2012, 37–59) suggested that leaders should have the ability or the willingness to be system thinkers, boundary spanners, conceptualisers and connectors, but as Brookes argued, they must crucially 'frame' social problems. Leaders continuously work in resource-constrained situations to identify unmet social needs and co-create public value (Liddle, 2018b, 967–990). Robinson and Morgan (2015, 153–168) call for leaders who are capable of thinking holistically within complex, ambiguous and uncertain contexts, but within these public spaces, leaders need to develop political astuteness, and other personal skills: interpersonal skills, reading people and contexts, building alignment and alliances, and strategic direction and scanning (Hartley and Fletcher, 2008).

HAVE CONTEXTUAL REALITIES CREATED THE NEED FOR A NEW (RELATIONAL) PUBLIC LEADERSHIP?

Since the 2008 economic and financial downturns, governments of all political hues have been seeking interventions to ongoing social and economic disintegration of communities. New global realities such as post-BREXIT, COVID-19, and Black Lives Matter mean that leaders have an even greater imperative to adopt innovative

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strategies for sustainable renewal and renaissance. COVID-19 has put a further strain on those struggling in their socio-economic position (Todres and Diaz, 2020), and while police statistics only show a partial image, figures indicate that hidden crimes have increased during the pandemic (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Modern-day slavery, being ordinarily difficult to detect, is hidden and under-reported. With accelerated economic hardship, the pandemic may have provided the means for organised crime operations to adapt in ways that law enforcement has not experienced before (Europol, 2020). Where masses are being encouraged to isolate, Todres and Diaz (2020) argue that coronavirus restrictions could cause a decrease in the detection of exploitation, making it subsequently harder to reach victims, and allowing for potential networks to thrive.

Faced with the recovery from periods of sustained change and cuts in resources, together with the devastating impacts of the pandemic, UK police services are managing a rising volume of demands. At the same time, they are handling increasingly complex and emotionally demanding tasks in difficult circumstances. There have also been significant changes in the policing role. These require police officers and staff to take on what in the past would have been regarded as a public health and welfare role, while still being expected to deliver their traditional policing functions and activities (Bittner, 1970).

Police inhabit a world in which their safety and success require them to be vigilant and attentive to the smallest indication of a hazardous situation or an important piece of evidence. The police response to COVID-19 has amplified the need to be vigilant, consultative and to work in partnership to respond to practical, social and emotional community needs and demands. No longer can police offer a 'silver bullet' to respond to the public; they must be reactive, but also provide sustainable, risk-assessed future-facing solutions to much broader societal problems. The police therefore need to operate in more transformative and novel environments, often in unfamiliar settings, but with closer attention to the need for dialogue and relational interactions. The pandemic offers an unprecedented setting, and not only have county lines presented the need for new and unfamiliar responses, but often police take on deliberate and preventative public health policing roles which are consciously located within a wider system, including communities (Public Health England and College of Policing, 2019). Policing with a public health lens is moving up public service agendas (Bucerius et al., 2021, 15), and a public health approach in this context is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as seeking: 'To improve the health and safety of all individuals by addressing underlying risk factors that increase the likelihood that an individual will become a victim or a perpetrator of violence' (Police Foundation and KPMG, 2019)

Recent evidence from policing the pandemic (to be discussed more fully in the case findings later in this chapter) indicates the scale of vulnerable individuals and groups within 'left-behind' places' (Addidle and Liddle, 2020) who are at risk and have a higher than average likelihood of becoming a victim in county lines criminality. It is therefore essential that place leaders, including police and other first responders,

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collaborate to overcome problems, and build relational connections between agencies for reducing crime in the interests of the common good and wider society.

Despite apparently similar trajectories in response to national government policies for crime and county lines, the concepts of relational leadership and 'contestation' are historical and locked-in features of leadership processes and practices. Prior, enmeshed relationships act as a significant constraint on how different agencies within places share different histories and leadership cultures in responses within different socio-economic profiles. Consequentially, these factors lead to varied social constructs, values and belief systems that govern behaviours and how new organisational forms evolve. Different types of leadership will play out in varied ways in specific places, and the shape of responses to crime and county lines will inform future strategies for action, determined by a constellation of key factors and relationship practices supporting the leadership.

As place leadership has moved up the political agenda, partnerships have multiplied across all social service areas. In emergency services, health, economic development, environment and climate change, fragmentation rendered many partnerships ineffective in responding to escalating wicked issues. Once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, many public managers were thrust into new and unfamiliar roles, such as taking on a public health policing role, as previously highlighted, or others multi-tasking across traditional organisational boundaries, thereby undertaking ever more novel and unfamiliar roles. These unprecedented times present not only a crisis but a continuum of crises; but also reinforce the importance of place leadership. Furthermore, to some of the threats arising as a result of the continuum of crises, we can envisage potential new opportunities for place leadership.

COVID-19 has already highlighted local and regional disparities in health, education, social care, and general safety and resilience within local communities, and the UK government launched a Levelling Up Fund worth £4 billion for England, to support economic recovery. All localities are expected to deliver Local Recovery Plans but the loss of European Union Funds resulting from BREXIT will impact more acutely on poor, de-industrialised localities with limited employment opportunities, fewer business start-ups and a lack of clear discussion or resolution on replacement funds such as UK Shared Prosperity Funds. The perilous economic state of many impoverished communities created a fertile recruiting ground for county lines crime gangs in particular, but led to increased criminality more generally. Leading in the public interest is therefore of crucial significance for police and their place-based leadership partners, as we shall now discuss in more depth.

WHY THE NEED TO LEAD IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST AND IDENTIFY VULNERABLE INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED IN COUNTY LINES?

Undoubtedly, ongoing austerity and the impacts on localities with less public sector funding to cope with rising social problems is having catastrophic consequences

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post-BREXIT and during COVID-19. Many hitherto hidden issues have become more prevalent, and arguably BREXIT led to increased levels of hate crime, racial disharmony, criminal activity, terrorist attacks, people trafficking, cyber-crime and escalated social discord. The rise in use of foodbanks in poor areas and the growth in ever more vulnerable and disenfranchised individuals and groups such as the homeless, rough sleepers and refugees, placed police and social services under severe strain. State, non-state, charitable third sector and voluntary and faith and church groups responded to unprecedented levels of demand, but without the necessary resources to offer support.

As Brookes (2020) suggested, vulnerable people, often victims of domestic violence, or young people involved in county lines, may be equally as isolated as those suffering from mental health, but are often blamed by statutory agencies for the situations they find themselves in. In fact, by stigmatising them in this way, there is a failure to tackle the underlying social determinants that create their conditions. This in turn leads to predatory offenders exploiting the vulnerable, and Brookes calls for better multi-agency 'framing' of situations. Framing the situation is a critical element in problem-solving, as first responders are usually well placed to identify the symptoms, causes and inter-connectedness of vulnerability, and make sense of how individuals perceive their conditions. The issue of who leads in such situations can emphasise the way that leaders tend to frame a problem around their own perceptions and experiences, rather than focusing on the characteristics of the problem that faces them and suggesting ways in which agencies can respond (Brookes, 2020). It is vital therefore for police or other first responders to sense-make and understand how other leaders might interpret, read and frame a situation to identify any risk of potential harm, as well as signposting individuals to relevant welfare agencies. The need for innovative relational and dialogic leadership in the public interest, and for collaborative leaders, is of utmost importance, as the following two in-depth sections on policing county lines testify.

WHO LEADS IN FRAMING THE WICKED ISSUE, AND POLICING COUNTY LINES?

Police and other state and non-state agencies are able to take the initiative to improve the public good, due to their unique combination of knowledge, skills and competencies (Morgan and Cook, 2015). They also understand the unique role that public institutions (such as police forces and social services) occupy, and the ways in which police officers can work in collaborative ways to interface with multiple entities in public, non-profit, business and other civic institutions and individuals and groups. One important point that is important to highlight, is that in addition to the skills, knowledge and competencies needed to undertake their roles, police officers must always be aware of the moral ends of collective action. The growth in wicked issues such as county lines leads to diverse value conflicts and declining trust in public institutions, but police officers, like other state officials who interact with citizens

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and other groups, must always be aware of their statutory responsibilities and duties. Police have ultimate authority sanctioned by the state and the monopoly of legitimate (coercive) force, as well as a specialisation in crime control (Addidle, 2021). They must also have an awareness of the European and wider international guidance on protecting and safeguarding the human rights of every individual.

Often any central government will struggle to meet the specific needs of localities or places because of the need to maintain control and social order. There are also difficulties in understanding the scale of competing local interests, and appreciating the complex social, economic and environmental challenges confronting communities, and those state agents like the police who are charged with working with other agencies to implement policies determined far away from the places to be policed. It is important that central government understands that place-based leadership is an overarching precondition for effective policy, because citizens' sense of connection to place means an acknowledgement of prioritising the localities in which people work and reside (Beer et al., 2020, 46). Police officers, like other elected or non-elected state and non-state agents, can improve policy implementation at the level of place because of the potential for dynamic, adaptable and facilitative ways of direct interaction with local communities and other stakeholders. However, as Lipsky (2010) demonstrated, street-level bureaucrats (including, we would argue, police officers) are capable of frustrating policy implementation as well as improving it. Place-based policies can be successful in building collective agency, local resources, knowledge and capacities. Not only do place leaders have a commitment and vested interest in enhancing the well-being of the places in which they live and work, but they also have specific knowledge of their local areas, understanding of social networks and resources, and the capacity and motivation to drive long-term change through delivering centrally determined policies at the level of place-based implementation for delivery of services. Armed with this intimate knowledge on how communities work, police officers and other first responders are uniquely placed to lead in the public interest alongside other agencies, and together they can formulate different strategies and practices in pursuit of solutions to criminality and the rise in county lines activity. The case findings are introduced in the following section to examine how county lines criminality is dealt with in practice.

HOW DO POLICE AND OTHER PLACE-BASED LEADERS LEAD IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST WITHIN COUNTY LINES? THE CASE FINDINGS

Organisationally, significant changes have taken place to the way policing and other first responder agencies are managed in terms of structures, targets and service delivery. Furthermore, the need for continual improvement in performance has taken place at the same time as unprecedented challenges in policing a pandemic that maintains the duty of policing with the consent of the public. The speed of changes necessitates adjustments, fine-tuning and innovations that require joint problem-solving,

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and co-production in partnership working. Dealing with wicked issues must focus on 'what can be done rather than what could be done' (National Police Foundation, 2020). According to the Children's Society (2019), cases of children who are criminally exploited (CCE) have been rising across the UK, and so too has the prevalence of county lines drug supply (NCA, 2017), and a spike in media coverage of trafficking and exploitation. County lines use of children falls under modern-day slavery, the most common type being labour exploitation due to children being forced into the distribution of illegal substances (Spicer, 2019, 873–886). County lines – identified by the police as the migration across borders to sell illicit drugs (NCA, 2017, 2019) – has seen increases in the use of children in drug supply and the exploitation of a number of vulnerable groups in society (Robinson et al., 2019). The UK government defines county lines as:

> A term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of 'deal line'. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons. (Home Office, 2018)

County lines is the business model of drug dealing with dedicated mobile phone lines (deal lines) to take orders for drugs, send mass marketing texts and offer deals through social media. The NCA suggests that there are over 2000 deal lines linked to 1000 county lines. The customer bases are sometimes sold to other gangs to avoid detection by law enforcement (NCA, 2019). The primary motivation is financial gain (Spicer, 2019, 873–886): an individual line has profits of over £800 000 per year, with single, daily trips generating up to several thousand pounds. The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) suggests an annual turnover of £0.5 billion in such activity (Ministry of Justice, 2019).

The success of county lines networks is heavily dependent upon exploitative techniques of manipulation, coercion, force and violence, where the victims are disproportionately vulnerable children and young people. Illegal supplies such as class A drugs are moved from large cities to smaller rural areas (Robinson et al., 2019, 694–711), and gangs coerce vulnerable young children into illegal activities such as drug dealing and forced prostitution. Perpetrators manipulate children by providing rewards such as gifts or money, or even forcing a debt onto the victim. This debt makes the victim feel that they are unable to stop the activities; the perpetrators threaten the children and/or their families in order to gain further control of them (Stone, 2018, 285–293). City centres are saturated with drug dealers, so smaller towns and rural areas with less competition are targeted, as perpetrators are less known to local police (Spicer, 2019, 873–886). Advances in transportation and technology, improved police practices and loopholes in the law have encouraged criminal gangs into using children and young people to supply drugs, transport money and hide or use knives and firearms.

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Increasing professionalised arrangements involve widespread exploitation of young and vulnerable people to expand the use of class A drugs (Andell and Pitts, 2018), as the numbers of people who take either crack and/or heroin increased by 4.4 per cent between 2015 and 2017 (O'Connor, 2019). The numbers of people seeking treatment for crack misuse from services increased by 49 per cent between 2015 and 2018 (O'Connor, 2019). According to the NCA (2016, 2017), London-based criminal gangs are exploiting and trafficking children and young people from the capital to areas such as Essex, Devon and Cornwall, and the North East.

Finigan-Carr et al. (2016, 3257–3281) argue that young people who live in relatively deprived neighbourhoods, with a street culture, have an increased likelihood of involvement in negative peer relationships, encounters with violent victimisation, easier access to weapons and witnessing street violence. This increases fear of future lethal violence, and reduces the ability of families and communities to manage aggressive youth behaviours. Simon Harding (2014) describes how a reputation for violence in some street cultures may not return fiscal capital for the young people, but provides social or street capital. A reputation for violence can offer bonding capital or a sense of belonging to similarly located peers, which serves to imbue a sense of family (or 'fam'), but does little to elevate young people from their deprived neighbourhoods; for this to occur, bridging capital is needed (Harding, 2014). Andell and Pitts (2018) argue that English street gangs have evolved into drugs distribution networks which now cover large areas of the UK. This evolution is contingent on the global features of availability of class A drugs and the local bridging capital of pre-existing criminal networks. This suggests that in the development of county lines networks the required bridging capital has been achieved, and there is a need for agencies to work closely together in responding to this wicked issue.

Many separate social issues lead gangs and organised crime groups (OCGs) to recruit vulnerable young people to county lines activities, from reduced funding to welfare services (housing, education, youth services, healthcare and criminal justice), to increased social media usage by young people. Agencies need to work together to build intelligence and work to reduce opportunities for gangs to recruit vulnerable people. Many organisations working with children and young people (such as schools, social care, police) miss the signs of county lines involvement and exploitation. This is largely down to a lack of awareness and framing of the problem.

The National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCLCC) was launched in 2018 and is jointly run by the NCA and National Police Chief's Council (NPCC), and works with other organisations to map national county lines threats and prioritise action against the most significant perpetrators. There are still several known intelligence gaps regarding different areas of county lines information; however, these gaps are being filled due to ongoing work and cooperation between agencies. Ministry of Justice (2019) *Practice Guidance* suggests inter-borough strategy meetings between local authorities, police forces and key practitioners (children's services, youth offending teams (YOTs), healthcare and early intervention hubs), as county lines involves travel across boroughs. These are also an opportunity to share best practice more widely, as well as to build links to enable better information-sharing in order to

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protect potential victims. This would also help areas which previously have not had the need to address large-scale drug operations or gangs, and are now ill-equipped to deal with issues arising in their area. Additionally, the perpetrators and victims may be from different areas, meaning that organisations need to liaise with counterpart services in other areas.

There is a lot of overlap between county lines dealing, modern slavery and human trafficking. Modern slavery and child trafficking laws are increasingly being used to protect children from being exploited by county lines activity (NPCC, 2019). It has been suggested that convicting county lines offenders under modern slavery attaches a stigma to county lines offending, rather than a 'badge of honour' associated with drug dealing (Spicer, 2019, 873–886). Trafficking comprises exploitation of victims for the gain of others, whether this be financially, sexually or for domestic and labour purposes. The victims are given no way out of the forced situations and can be exposed to threatening and violent actions if they try to leave. The trafficking of humans is considered to be the biggest organised crime type worldwide, but the issue dates back over 200 years, and violates the human rights of the victims. Combating the issue is a priority for UK police forces and other first responder organisations.

The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) identifies and supports victims of human trafficking and collects data about victims. An NCA (2019) report shows that the NRM reported more cases of exploitation within the county lines model, compared to any other forms of exploitation or abuse reported, and this is due in part to the combined efforts of law enforcement, government, local authorities and charities. The NCA report says that its numbers are still likely underestimating the size of the problem, as data is presented by primary exploitation type, so the full extent of exploitation is not clear (NCA, 2019). First responder organisations in England and Wales are specified authorities which are authorised to make a direct referral of potential victims of human trafficking to the NRM. Authorities include police services, border services, the NCA and child protection services. First responder organisations hold responsibilities such as detecting and referring potential victims. It is the responsibility of first responder organisations to ensure that appropriate safeguarding measures are in place, and the well-being of child victims is the top priority (Home Office, 2018).

In order for first responders, practitioners and policy-makers to assist victims to attain their potential, both micro and macro changes need to take place. Social capital of community networks needs to be enhanced, and new models of moral redistributive economic policy enacted. Policies and practices need to be founded on new and robust evidence. This evidence, in conjunction with stakeholder knowledge, could lead to a realistic programme for collective action in both the micro and the macro spheres. Place leaders in the form of police and other first responders are uniquely placed and equipped to take on these roles of providing the vital evidence

According to Ford (2018), thresholds for service interventions are too high, with young people only receiving help when they are at crisis point, usually when their behaviour is more entrenched. Early interventions such as youth services and outreach work are being removed, despite young people standing a better chance of

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moving away from county lines involvement if reached sooner. Partnership between all appropriate agencies is key, as individuals may not meet thresholds for single agencies. Several needs are seen separately, and not recognised as combining to create complex needs, resulting in vulnerability to gang involvement. Moyle (2019, 739–755) argues that multi-agency support is necessary to allow 'structurally vulnerable' populations to remove themselves from exploitative relationships, as some victims see county lines activity as preferable to other kinds of income generation. Victims may not wish to engage with services, as they enjoy the lifestyle that county lines activity brings, or need the money, or fear reprisals if they try to move away from county lines activities, or they may not see themselves as a victim. However, it is clear that an overall strategic approach involving police and other first responders is essential to bringing together hitherto disparate and isolated agency engagement to the problem.

Gangs have also had to adapt from their dependency on a 'free and low-profile within the mass population' due to the lack of footfall during the lockdown, and have since been able to benefit from COVID-19 restrictions (Saggers, 2020). Gangs have been able to take advantage of pandemic restrictions by utilising key workers and their ability to move more freely during the lockdown. To this effect, drug dealers have attempted to acquire National Health Service (NHS) identifications and lanyards in order to pose as key workers and carers, to reduce the chances of being stopped. These identifications are usually attained through the creation of fakes; however, there have also been reports of key workers being mugged for their credentials (Sky News, 2020). Drug dealers have also dressed as joggers, dog walkers and Deliveroo drivers to legitimise their presence outside during the lockdown (*The Guardian*, 2020). Face masks also allowed dealers to hide their identity from CCTV, while appearing as health-conscious members of the public (Harding, 2020). Worryingly, criminal gangs dressed children as key workers (for example, Deliveroo workers) to deliver drugs (Children's Society, 2020). COVID-19 restrictions hampered the ability of front-line agencies to risk-assess for child exploitation, and exacerbated the potential for county line harm to remain hidden (University of Nottingham, 2020). The NCLCC has seen a 33 per cent rise in 'cuckooed' addresses due to hotels and other commercial and private rental accommodation closing during this period. 'Cuckooing' is a practice where people take over a person's home and use the property to facilitate exploitation. It takes its name from cuckoos, who take over the nests of other birds (Oxford Council, n.d.).

Young people represent a complex and high-risk vulnerable group, often experiencing early trauma, repeated loss, attachment issues, learning difficulties and mental health problems (Chitsabesan et al., 2006). Reduced access to support and structure, arising from school closures and agencies working in different ways (remotely, reduced direct contact), with lower staffing numbers, may have exacerbated young people's vulnerability. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) reported that in the first month of restrictions, calls from neighbours, extended family members and delivery drivers about children facing emotional abuse rose from 529 to 792 (Morgan, 2020). However, child pro-

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tection referrals from the usual sources – schools and health professionals – fell by more than 50 per cent overall, while in some local authorities this figure was over 75 per cent (Morgan, 2020).

The UK government responded to the potential impact of the pandemic on children's services with the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (2020). Provisions contained in the bill during its first reading were designed to enable children's services departments to test different ways of working by freeing them from 'requirements imposed by children's social care legislation'. This amendment to the legislation received a furious response from the voluntary sector, with Children's Rights charity Article 39 threatening legal action against the Department of Education because it dilutes the duties of social workers to children in care, and was introduced without due consultation and parliamentary scrutiny (Article 39, 2020). UK Labour leader Keir Starmer tabled a parliamentary motion requiring the government's amendments to be annulled (Simpson, 2020).

In the absence of a legal definition, and limited guidance or awareness of county lines, children are seen as criminals rather than victims (Children's Society, 2018). It is important that the safeguarding needs of children exploited through county lines are not overlooked. County lines are associated with physical and sexual violence and abuse, causing physical and emotional harm, and isolation from peers or social networks, which can lead to self-harm and a decline in the child's well-being. A negative impact on a child's future outcomes and achievements results from persistently missing school in order to undertake criminal activities, or spending less time studying at home, or being exposed to four or more adverse childhood experiences, leading to increased likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours. All create greater potential harms to families of children involved in county lines.

High-risk drinking, under-age sex and teenage pregnancy, smoking tobacco and cannabis, using heroin or crack cocaine, or being a victim of or committing a violent act (Hughes et al., 2017), all lead to poor mental health and self-harm. The Children's Commissioner (2019) found that gang-associated children were 77 per cent more likely to have an identified mental health need than other children assessed by children's services, and twice as likely to have a history of self-harm. Victims of county lines exploitation can also be subject to the practice of 'plugging', where drugs are concealed anally or vaginally for transportation.

During the pandemic and lockdown period, general crime levels declined, due to the restrictions of being outside or travelling, unless for essential purposes. However, county lines drug dealing continued across the country. The police and the NCA have long been able to access and analyse 'burner' pay-as-you-go phones and smart phones when investigating and obtaining intelligence on OCGs. As a result, OCGs have traditionally turned to encrypted devices, which allows them to communicate with one another in respect of drugs and other serious and organised crime without being detected by law enforcement agencies. In June 2020 it was widely reported that law enforcement agencies are now able to decrypt encrypted devices to assist with the detection and prevention of crime. A huge increase in arrests and criminal prosecutions for drug related offences followed (NCA, 2020), and as the following discus-

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sion and concluding comments reveal, the ways in which place-based, multi-agency partners/leaders countering county lines and drug trafficking built relational/dialogic approaches to this wicked issue were a critical factor in creating public/social value, and resilient systems for overall public interest and common good.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

There have been many recent attempts to be more innovative and entrepreneurial in designing public services in response to wicked issues; and COVID-19 has also exposed just how unsuitable and inadequate some existing delivery mechanisms are to respond to particular client groups such as victims of county lines and drug trafficking. The rise in the number of vulnerable individuals drawn into county lines and drug trafficking since the beginning of the pandemic can be attributed to escalating economic problems and poverty, disadvantage and growing levels of inequality. County lines and drug trafficking necessitates police, law enforcement and other statutory and non-statutory agents to develop continual and relational dialogue across organisational and geographical/jurisdictional boundaries, to assess levels of risk and ensure the well-being of those involved. Approaches to risk differ between agencies and each will have a differing set of values conditioning their behaviour and responses. In this context a wide variety of stakeholders occupy the public realm, both formally and informally, as there is no one best solution to such wicked issues. Although the police may have the primary role in seeking to deal with county lines with a level of oversight and support from the NCA, it is clear that there are countless other statutory and non-statutory agencies also occupying the governance space within places. Police no longer deal solely with policing issues, but are increasingly drawn into more public health and welfare service provision by collaborative partnering. Moreover, each partner brings their own models of the public good. All partners must negotiate across organisational boundaries in voluntaristic and discretionary ways to co-create the public good, because formal authority is insufficient as the basis for action. Informal influence and power relationships may be more significant in achieving outcomes.

In determining what the public good means, each partner will have a different understanding of what constitutes the public interest and the public good, and their engagement and assessment of safeguarding, vulnerability and risk will be governed by statutory responsibilities (in the case of police or social services, for example) and a set of values pertinent to their own professional culture and standards of behaviour. Policing county lines is very complex and demands the mobilisation of a wide variety of people and publics and place-based action, where conflict and contestation of interests will be evident. Nevertheless, all actors must continually share tacit knowledge, and read the rapidly changing contexts, people and situations. Those involved must engage in innovation in new practices and dialogue to sense-make how others are interpreting, reading and framing situations differently, as both context and chal-

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lenges escalate. Often this requires new institutional forms; but importantly there is a need to re-frame both the problem and potential interventions.

All agencies involved in county lines are obliged to develop relational and dialogic leadership to overcome historical contestation and enmeshed agency relationships which are locked-in features of existing processes and practices. This can also reveal some of the significant constraints on how different agencies share different histories and cultures in response to altered contexts. Consequentially, these factors lead to varied social constructs, values and belief systems that govern behaviours, so different forms of engagement and types of leadership play out in varied ways in specific places. In the case of county lines, these shape responses and future strategies for action that must be determined within a constellation of actors identifying key factors and shaping relationship practices for resilient service provision and to secure safer communities.

Many of these organisations involved in county lines have seen statutory services, finances, equipment and staff levels cut due to overall state fiscal policies and austerity and budget cuts since 2010 (especially in the UK), and in some cases stress levels have risen, with professionals feeling very vulnerable too. In the complicated landscape of partner agencies (police, NCA, MoJ, children's services, schools, education, youth services, health services, healthcare, housing, the NPCC, border services, YOTs, child protection agencies, mental health agencies, social services, the Children's Commissioner, the NSPCC, National County Lines (NCL) coordinators, victims themselves), all need to share knowledge and build intelligence. We are arguing here that by working through relational and dialogic approaches to sharing values, we are acknowledging that this 'post-heroic' way of determining what is the common good, and building social and public value, may be at variance with the traditional cultural values still prevalent in policing.

All partners need to develop innovative solutions and service approaches, in co-production with other agencies, that are resilient and sustainable for the future merging of values and cultures/ways of operating, and assessing risk/vulnerability. Recognition of the values of others enables better pooling of resources, knowledge, staff and information technology for common purpose and the common good. The ability to merge structures, operations, targets and delivery mechanisms can be achieved by adopting innovative relational practices and novel institutional forms of engagement.

We argue that this specific model of responding to vulnerable individuals drawn into county lines and drug trafficking would enhance service delivery, build stakeholder relationships over the long term, and eventually (we propose) respond to risk and harm by building greater levels of resilience to enhance both the public good and community well-being. The need to quickly assess hazards, risks and vulnerable people requires each agency to be aware of who the other actors are and how other agencies assess risk. All have varying values drawn from statutory requirements or professional codes of conduct, and there is an imperative to merge these in the interests of the common good.

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As space for policy intervention continues to be squeezed and public budgets face severe constraints, we have argued that for localities to survive the onslaught of internal and external changes, place leaders who work collectively and more collaboratively than in the past will need to orchestrate combined strategies for sustainable communities (Shutt and Liddle, 2019, 196–207; Brookes, 2010; O'Leary and Ospina, 2016), thereby unlocking resources for allowing 'left-behind' places to achieve their full potential. The approach is novel, and quite different from previous approaches to criminal activity because in developing relational forms of engagement and creating dialogue between key leaders, they are able to re-frame and re-prioritise the types of interventions needed. Within the field of policing, traditionally police were key (and legitimate) organisational players. However, the escalation in criminal activity and involvement of other key players in places, and the more flexible and fluid, informal arrangements between agencies, has led to continual flux beyond organisational boundaries and between agencies as they seek to deal with crime and county lines. State, non-state and citizen agents/agencies have an imperative to navigate complex sets of vertical, legal authority structures within fragmented, horizontal and largely informal and contested spaces of interaction. Within policing, there is continual relationship-building, reflection and organisational learning to determine the correct institutional and organisational 'fix' appropriate to place needs. Competing agendas require bargaining and negotiation, due to ongoing contestation of socially and politically acceptable ways of leading. All are necessary to achieve the most appropriate strategies and policy interventions for safeguarding young people at risk of potential harm due to their involvement in county lines.

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