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Coercion and crime: Convergences, divergences and ‘county lines’

Criminology & Criminal Justice

1–23

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DOI: 10.1177/17488958231153981

journals.sagepub.com/home/crj



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Abstract

How can we understand coercion in a ‘county lines’ context? By drawing on data gathered with criminal justice practitioners, social workers, mothers of sons engaged in county lines and young people, this article draws on Colvin’s Differential Coercion Theory to argue that coercion in a county lines context is multifaceted; occurs on both interpersonal and impersonal levels and results in social-psychological deficits that create ‘spirals of coercion’. This article also considers divergences with Colvin’s theory which include ‘hyper-contexts’, the exertion of agency to acquire fast money and material gains and coercion online. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications for research, policy and practice.

Keywords

Agency, coercion, county lines, gangs, grooming, organised crime

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Introduction

Discussions of ‘county lines’ have dominated social rhetoric around crime and communities in recent times. Headlines focus on pernicious drug gangs that exploit children to traffic drugs from urban to rural areas (BBC, 2019).¹ Academic research illustrates a similar phenomenon. Saturated drug markets have led to a landscape of drug gang ‘evolution’ (Whittaker et al., 2019). The term county lines has become synonymous with ‘a recently evolved model of drug distribution in the United Kingdom involving the transportation and distribution of drugs from urban metropolitan centres to provincial, local or rural towns’ (Harding, 2020: viii).

Despite the emergence of recent studies into county lines (Coomber and Moyle, 2018; Harding, 2020; McLean et al., 2020), gaps in knowledge remain. The supposition that young people² are coerced into county lines pervades the discourse. In reality, little is known about the nature of this coercion particularly from a theoretical perspective. In 2000, Colvin developed *Differential Coercion Theory* (DCT), arguably the most expansive criminological theory to focus on coercion. Colvin’s theory received critical acclaim (Baron, 2009) but has yet to be considered in the United Kingdom. This article applies DCT to county lines and considers both the convergences and divergences with Colvin’s theory. Our focus here is on the experiences and accounts of those whose professional and personal lives are impacted by county lines, including young people on the periphery of this form of criminality. We highlight the importance of considering coercion as multi-faceted and related to both personal and impersonal situations and interactions and the ‘pull’ of county lines; fast money and material gains and nuances of coercion embedded within ‘hyper’ contexts and coercion online.

County lines

In recent years, there has been a sustained objective to understand the nature and extent of county lines. Several themes emerge from existing discourse. Research suggests that county lines demonstrates a ‘new’ form of criminality (Harding, 2020), although the ‘unique’ nature of county lines has been questioned by a number of scholars (i.e. Spicer et al., 2019; Turner et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the idea of ‘going country’ (Hallworth, 2016) and the emergence of county lines–related drug activity signifies an ‘important development in the retail drug supply landscape . . . a fast evolving and expanding drug supply model that involves outreach selling from major hubs, direct to heroin/crack users in provincial satellite areas’ (Coomber and Moyle, 2018: 1323).

County lines has a number of unique features. The use of mobile phone ‘lines’ to connect the drug supplier with new markets and social media posts to recruit drug sellers and users illustrates a reliance on technology not seen before (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). Certain terminology has become synonymous with county lines: ‘commuting’ (Hales and Hobbs, 2010) and ‘holidaying’ (Coomber and Moyle, 2012) help to explain how drug markets are operationalised; with daily visits by drug dealers to new areas for the former and more extended periods, the latter.

The success of county lines relies on the exploitation and manipulation of adults and children to move and deliver drugs (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). This enables drug

gangs to maximise profits and reduce the risk of criminal activity as it distances them from the supply transaction (Coomber and Moyle, 2018). Any vulnerability is a potential target, resulting in a broad profile of victims (National Crime Agency [NCA], 2018). However, young people are particularly susceptible, with children as young as 12 acting as ‘runners’ of county lines gangs (Robinson et al., 2019). The NCA (2019) suggests that up to 5000 children and young people are working county lines in the United Kingdom today.

The involvement of vulnerable young people means that county lines is closely related to Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and research demonstrates the myriad of ways in which young people are exploited, ranging from debt bondage to violence, including sexual violence, weapon-related incidents, coercion and control (Robinson et al., 2019). The Home Office describes CCE as when

an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity in exchange for what the victim needs or wants, and or/for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator, and/or through violence or the threat of violence. (p. 48)

In terms of county lines, there is evidence of ‘systematic targeting of young people’ who provide an easily accessible workforce and considered a commodity (Moyle, 2019). In addition, county lines is also considered as a form of Modern Day Slavery, with a landmark case in 2017 which saw the first offenders prosecuted under the Modern Slavery Act (2015) for involvement in county lines-related drug trafficking and exploitation (Stone, 2018). However, scholars question the binary distinction between victim and offender status in a county lines context (McLean et al., 2020). Finally, county lines is a highly lucrative and successful business model (Spicer et al., 2019). Research demonstrates a move away from territories and ‘postcodes’ and into more organised forms of criminality focused on profit generation and the monopolisation of criminal markets (Whittaker et al., 2019).

Scholars align county lines with the progression of street gangs (Harding, 2020) or the expansion of drug markets (Coomber and Moyle, 2018), the general consensus is that, in line with advances in technology and social media, county lines has become an illustration of the rapidly evolving gang landscape in the United Kingdom (Harding, 2020). Despite this, Spicer (2021) demonstrates how county lines discourse is at risk of sensationalising a phenomenon which has long been in existence, developing scapegoating and ‘seductive narratives’ while at the same time excluding wider discussions of marginalisation, social exclusion and the effects of austerity (also illustrated in Irwin-Rodgers, 2019 research). Some of the first and most influential theories of gang related violence associates these criminal groups with subcultures (Thrasher, 1927) illustrating how adherence to alternative and subcultural norms and values provide the basis of gang affiliation and violence. However, research into gangs largely originates from a criminological discipline and factors which ‘push’ young people into gangs, including marginalisation, poverty, previous experience of violence or abuse and so on are prioritised (Harris et al., 2012), making some young people ‘reluctant gangsters’ (Pitts, 2008). From a psychological perspective, ‘pull’ factors for gang membership include status, respect, social

inclusion, solidarity, money and protection (Harris et al., 2012). In short, both push and pull factors can explain gang membership and associated activities, including drug dealing and potentially, county lines.

There are factors which contribute to gang subcultures. Discussion of subcultures dates back to the 1950s and the development of Merton's (1938) anomie theory by Cohen in 1955. For Cohen, gang association provides marginalised youth with an alternative set of norms and values, which provide the basis of an 'alternative culture'; gang subcultures thus prioritise hedonism, risk taking and insubordination (Cohen, 1955). Other key features include solidarity, gangs providing family-like structures, protection, respect, involvement in delinquency (Fraser and Piacentini, 2014) intertwined with notions of hegemonic masculinity (Baird, 2017) and secrecy in adolescence when gang affiliation is most pervasive (Harris et al., 2012). All factors which also appear to influence young people associated with county lines, discussed as the article progresses.

County lines, coercion and control

It is widely reported that county lines-related criminality includes coercive control and that drug gangs use specific methods of recruitment, including 'hooks' (specific recruitment techniques), 'honey traps', recruitment via social media 'broadcasts', that is, Snapchat announcements and drug addiction (Mayor's Office, 2019). To understand how these approaches to coercion arise and are managed, it is useful to understand them within a theoretical framework. Colvin's Differential Coercion Theory (DCT; Colvin, 2000) assimilated a number of criminological theories including: social control theory (Hirschi, 1969), general strain theory (Agnew, 1992), the general theory of crime (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990), control balance theory (Tittle, 1995), structural Marxist theory (Colvin and Pauly, 1983), social support theory (Cullen, 1994) and social learning theory (Akers, 1997) and signified a considerable development of understandings of coercion.

According to Colvin (2000)

coercion refers to a power creating fear or anxiety that induces or threatens a person to do something. This power can exist in relations between individuals (interpersonal coercion) as well as in larger social contexts that are not directly related to individuals (impersonal coercion). (p. 195)

Interpersonal coercion arises from those in direct contact with the 'coerced', that is, family, peers, including peer groups and gangs, schools, places of work, the criminal justice system and so on. Here, coercion is 'achieved through the generation of fear that stems from the threatened or actual removal of emotional and material supports and through threats of, or actual use of, physical force' (Colvin, 2000: 5). Impersonal coercion is more structural and takes into account the effects of the state, poverty and marginalisation (Colvin, 2000).

Colvin's (2000) theory received widespread acclaim, particularly in the United States (Baron, 2009), Colvin et al. (2002:1) also developed DCT to consider the relationship between coercion and social support, arguing how 'coercion causes crime and social

support prevents crime' reflecting on the nuances of this relationship via both theoretical and empirical perspectives. Despite this, DCT has only been empirically investigated in a small number of studies. Unnever et al. (2004) found that both impersonal and interpersonal coercion relevant for their sample of middle-school students. Drawing on a sample of 300 homeless street youths, Baron (2009) considered the relationship between coercion and involvement in violent offending and also found support for Colvin's supposition that coercion leads to crime and affects involvement in crime due to causing anger, low self-control and replicating patterns of coercion. Baron (2009) argued that coercion is directly associated with involvement in crime and that 'the relationship between coercion and organized criminal activities is mediated through anger, self-control, and illegitimate social support' (p. 1089). Colvin (2007) also applied DCT to prison organisations, arguing that the framework is useful for considering deviance and social support in prisons in Mexico. Imperatively, this framework of coercion has yet to be considered in the United Kingdom and in light of coercion in a county lines context, lacunas addressed by this study.

Research methods

The study aimed to investigate several county lines specific phenomena: coercion and control in a county lines context and children's agency. The analysis in this article draws on a sample set of 63 participants. Qualitative interviews and focus groups were conducted with 22 Youth Offending Team (YOT) workers and social workers on the 'front-line' of response to county lines, many of whom had worked with young people throughout their 'county lines' trajectory. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 birth mothers of sons involved in county lines, across the United K (London (5), Liverpool (3), Hull (2), Norwich (2), Leeds (2), Manchester (2), Birmingham (2) and Cardiff (1)). 85% of the mothers were employed full or part-time (their professions included: teachers/head teachers, government employees, solicitors, doctors, nurses and charity/NGO workers). 15% were stay at home mothers. All had 2 or more children. There is to date, limited information related to the demographics of mothers of young people involved in county lines, thus it is difficult to ascertain how representative this sample is of mothers overall. The ethnicities of the young people discussed within this study (by mothers and practitioners) were: Black British, Black Caribbean, Black African, Asian, White British and mixed heritage and were mostly male, however, practitioners discussed the involvement of some young women in county lines.

The third phase of the data collection included 22 qualitative interviews (12 male and 10 female) with young people on the periphery of county lines, some of the young people live in areas known for county lines activity while others were associated with a homeless charity in London and live in hostels or sheltered accommodation. All had experience of county lines but to varying degrees, some had witnessed county lines activity; others had engaged with county lines. The participants were aged 16–24, of Black Caribbean, Black British, Asian and White Irish heritage. These data were collected over a period of 12 months, by psychologists and criminologists based at the University of Westminster and the University of Sussex.

The study adheres to the University of Westminster, Sussex University and British Psychological Society codes of ethical conduct. All participants received an information sheet and signed a consent form. The interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed. The research included a 'research sensitivity protocol' (including a number of areas, such as observing participants for signs of distress, ensuring that participants were aware that they could stop the interviews at any time and without giving a reason, etc.), particularly significant for the interviews with the mothers and young people. Engagement and rapport were supported by the first author's engagement with a homeless charity³ that supports the young people in the study. The first author worked with the young people and a key 'gatekeeper' at the organisation over a relatively lengthy period (12 months), thus supporting trust building and wider engagement.

The interview questions were similar in that they considered the main thematic areas of the research (coercion, control and young people's agency) but differed between the sample sets. The mothers were asked about their experiences as care givers of young people engaged in CL; interviews with the practitioners included reflections on coercion and control but with specific reference to the young people they support. Interviews with the young people focused more on individual perceptions. The data were catalogued, and coded; descriptive and then thematic analyses were performed. This was conducted for each phase of the research and each sample set, and then considered in light of extant theory, namely, Colvin's DCT and the main areas discussed below (interpersonal, impersonal coercion and the social-psychological deficits that are the result of coercion) alongside existing theories of young people's agency. A triangulation of the data from the three research sites occurred and highlighted the convergences and divergences between the perspectives of the young people, practitioners and parents of sons involved in county lines.

Findings and discussion

Colvin's DCT (2000) argues coercion relates to a power imbalance between the coerced and the coercer, which is used to force a person to behave in a certain way. This can occur via the use of threats of violence or because of the fear of violence. Coercion techniques are typically applied variously and inconsistently—'erratic coercion'—which results in higher levels of engagement in crime (Colvin, 2000).

Three main propositions of Colvin's theory are considered here. First, coercion is *interpersonal*; occurs directly and affects individuals. Second, coercion is *impersonal* and associated with structural factors of poverty, marginalisation, effects of gang violence and the criminal justice system. Finally, the *social-psychosocial deficits* that occur as a result of coercion: anger, weak social bonds, low self-control and 'coercive ideation' which is a reaction to coercion, where one moves from *being* coerced to *becoming* the coercer. All are closely related to offending; greater levels of coercion, in various settings, applied inconsistently leads to increased involvement in crime (Colvin, 2000).

This study found widespread support for these notions of coercion. However, there were divergences, including 'hyper-contexts', that is coercion via online forums and the limitations of the notion of impersonal coercion for some young people, in certain circumstances. This article highlights subcultures that glamorise violence, prioritise

material gains and ‘fast’ money, embedded within capitalism and hyper-consumerism, and which provide a context to county lines–related criminality. In addition, we consider young people’s agency and the factors that affect decision-making and association with county lines. In doing so, we expand on Colvin’s theory, reflecting on its applicability to coercion in a county lines context.

Interpersonal coercion

The data derived from this study illustrate a notion of a coercion that occurs directly and affects individuals – *interpersonal coercion* (Colvin, 2000). In the context of county lines, coercion occurs via (a) direct acts of interpersonal violence, including derogative violence and threats of violence to young people and/or their families; (b) coercion associated with grooming and which includes occasional indulgences intertwined with notions of friendship/peer groups; (c) the ‘lure’ of county lines, ‘fast, quick’ money, status capital and financial rewards (often associated with social mobility and the need to ‘get out’); considered within wider youth subcultures influenced by social media, capitalism and material gains.

The data demonstrated coercion in the form of direct, interpersonal violence, often during the initial stages of recruitment and at various points of a young person’s county lines trajectory, thus illustrating notions of CCE. A mother explained further: ‘. . . he came home one day with a broken wrist. A week later he had been beaten up – his nose broken and cuts and bruises everywhere. A month or so later he was stabbed’.⁴ Thus, violence acts a coercion mechanism and is reminiscent of discourse that considers ‘reluctant gangsters’ (Pitts, 2008), closely associated with reputation and fear as a young male described: ‘when you’ve lived in the area for years, you know what these people are about, but you’re terrified, you don’t wanna get on the wrong side of them, so you do what they say.’⁵

Interpersonal coercion is often associated with debt-bondage, as a mother described:

. . . he disappears for days on end, once for six weeks, he was only 14. He was in XXXX. He went with another boy who I knew was involved in county lines. He had an horrendous time. They got hooked on cannabis and told they owed money for drugs and the train journey. Then the disappearances started to become more regular. He comes home with cuts and bruises, other injuries, it’s clear he has not washed or changed his clothes. He says it’s nothing and that he’s fallen off his bike, obviously I don’t believe him.⁶

Several of the mothers also discussed threats made to their sons but also their wider families, for example: ‘this week we’ve had the fire brigade here to fire risk the house because there’s been threats to have our house petrol bombed. XXXX has said he’s had threats made against him . . . to keep him involved’.⁷ A young male explained further:

someone very close to me get hurt because they were scared to say no, they had no other option, but they got badly hurt. They got treats against themselves, their family members, it all depends on the gangs but a lot of days, they won’t hesitate to shoot your or stab you anyway.⁸

Thus, illustrating direct coercion to those involved and also their families.

Overt and often derogative violence also occurs within the county lines context as a YOT worker explained:

There is evidence of boys who are sexually exploited, at the start of their involvement and during their association, as threats and as punishment. This includes rape, stabbing in genital areas, forced stripping. More prevalent than in other forms of crime.⁹

A YOT manager elucidated further:

Most cases of young people transporting drugs includes 'plugging' (drugs inserted in a condom and in their anus). If they get robbed by their own gang or a rival gang 'spooing' might occur; where a spoon is inserted into the anus and the drugs removed. There's also 'dinking' where essentially someone stabs a young person up the arse. This leaves a scar and scar tissue, so the young people are unlikely to carry drugs again. The young people I work with are often proud they've been stabbed and survived, they post pictures of stab wounds on Instagram, but this is different; it's derogatory and leaves a lasting effect.¹⁰

In many instances, experiences of violence leads to trauma, because of this, and as a YOT worker explained,

most YOTs are moving towards a trauma model. What young people experience is trauma; post-traumatic stress, they are hyper-vigilant. There's drug debt too, sometimes from their own gang members, older members rob younger members, they may not know it was their own gang who carried out the robbery.¹¹

Interpersonal coercion includes grooming, defined by the NSPCC (2000), as associated with CCE (p. 1) and 'when someone builds a relationship, trust and emotional connection with a young person so they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them'. In a county lines context grooming is aligned with 'street-capital': young people are given money, new trainers, phones, and so on, as way to develop trust, rapport and encourage association county lines. A young male explained further:

When I was younger people used to come up to me all the time and say look man, you wanna make some money, there's this place, you just go up there for a little bit, hold on to something and you get £5000 a week. That happened to me all the time. I've had people buying me stuff. I was interested cos some of them could really sell it to you, they'd say I've done this a million times, they know what to do, it's natural to them, and it didn't seem bad. They didn't tell me the dangers, they didn't tell me the risks, they said it's like a holiday. I got bought a tracksuit. They handed it to me in a bag, but they didn't say nothing to me that day, they just said, have this, then two weeks later they started trying to hang out with me and then said, like you gotta move these drugs.¹²

A YOT manager explained the rationale behind this form of coercion:

the softer side is more effective, if a perpetrator went full on and was aggressive it would raise concerns—they get in there first with the softer stuff, the money, the gifts, the promises and then once they've got them [young people] they feel like they can't get out.¹³

Coercion is often nuanced and closely related to peer groups, friendship, illustrating alliance with drivers for gang involvement discussed earlier and Colvin's (2000) proposition of a peer group as a coercive environment. A female participant explained further:

It's fake love. They see a group of people so tightly connected that they think its love, but that's not love, that's fear or loyalty. A lot of things that I've noticed in my time, being around all that, is that it's about fear and coercion, you don't know whether you can say no, you don't know how to say no, even if you know something is wrong you have no other option but to do it, it's like they'll take my life or someone else's.¹⁴

A practitioner explained further:

. . . they often perceive a friendship, they turn up at home with things that the family couldn't afford to buy them, gifts . . . suddenly they're part of something. Then all of a sudden, they're involved, and they've got errands to run and then gradually it gets bigger and bigger and then there's a fear that if they don't go, they'll be in trouble, their families will be under threat.¹⁵

Thus, illustrating a 'cycle of coercion' which often begins with notions of friendship but rapidly escalates as a young person explains: 'what happens is the severity of what you're holding becomes bigger, you're holding more drugs or a knife or whatever, then they've got stuff to incriminate you and you are forced to trust the older person'.¹⁶

In many instances, coercion is designed to target a young person's vulnerabilities: 'often the ones that do the grooming maximise on the needs of those they groom. People talk about exchanging money and gifts, but I don't think that's necessarily true. I think that friendship, there's a whole range of hooks that can be used'.¹⁷ Another practitioner explained how coercion is perceived: 'I think even though he recognised that what he was getting involved in could get him into a lot of trouble, he was still, yeah, but that guy's my mate, I understand that he's a bit of a criminal or whatever, but he's still my mate'.¹⁸ This relates to earlier discussions of the victim-offender nexus (McLean et al., 2020) as a YOT worker explained:

I'm working with one young person (14) who was picked up on a motorway in a car with an 18-year-old. The 18-year-old knew what he was doing, the 14-year-old had the drugs on him. We consider the 14-year-old a victim, there are obvious safe-guarding issues, exploitation but he doesn't see it this way and says things like: 'I'm not exploited, it's my friend, I wanted to be there'.¹⁹

The data also illustrated the complexities of coercion including the relationship between coercion and young people's skills or 'attributes', as a male participant explained:

People are recruited by people that know them, people who know their strengths and weaknesses, by word of mouth. They say, do you wanna make quick money and you're like, yeah. They won't say is that I've got this line that I wanna move, I've got these shotters [drug sellers],

you'll know this beforehand. The reason they recruit someone that knows about this kind of lifestyle is because you'll know how to act if you get caught by the police.²⁰

In divergence from extant notions of coercion and control the data illustrated various 'pulls' towards county lines, including money and material gains. These factors help expand on Colvin's (2000) theory by introducing the notion of agency. The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) initiated discussions of children's agency in 1989 and since then there has been a concerted effort to consider young people's 'social agency' and acknowledge young people as 'active social actors' (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012). Nevertheless, there are few studies which explore young people's agency in light of organised crime (for an exception: Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017) and to date, no study has considered agency and county lines.

There are a number of divergences between the data sets, closely aligned with paternalism. Concurrent themes arising from the practitioner and parent data were largely associated with the first two notions of coercion, threats, control and grooming, closely related to notions of CCE and a 'reluctant gangster' (Pitts, 2008) narrative. The persuasive theme of this narrative is the reluctance of young people to engage in county lines, and drivers for engagement in county lines as predominantly fear, coercion and grooming – strategies enacted 'against' young people, leaving little room to consider decision-making and agency in a county lines context.

The young people in this study expressed different opinions, related to the last component – the 'pulls' of coercion, specifically material gain and 'fast money' and which reflect on young people's ability to *exert agency*. While the young people acknowledged direct recruitment methods, most felt that county lines provided them with an accessible way to make money, as a male participant explained:

You can make money—like a lot of money, once you've built your line, there's different amounts of weed that you can pick up, but you can easily make over a grand. So, you start small, but it's word of mouth how stuff sells, you say yeah take my number, and soon as that line grows you make more money, that's added to selling in London and then if you have a line outside of London you're making even more money.²¹

Another young person explained further:

It's hard to make to make that money doing something else. It's more money than you can even think of—it seems too good to be true. If you're involved and connected with gangs, you'll keep going up, the money gets bigger, the drugs get bigger you're just going up and then you go to new places like Birmingham or whatever and get kids to run the drugs for you.²²

However, the young people questioned the notion of 'easy money' outlining the risks and unpredictability of county lines 'shotting' [drug selling] as a participant explained further:

Money is the main driver, to be honest it's a lot of hassle and if you're not in it to make money it's not really a hobby you know what I'm saying. It's quick money at the end of the day. Like, in a day's work you can easily get a couple of thousand pounds or something like that. It's like

any other job you have to deal with customers, but like anything can happen at any time, so you've gotta be prepared for that.²³

Colvin's DCT provides little room for exploring how young people make decisions or exert *agency*. These latter discussions highlight the importance of understanding agency – an agency which is often bounded and restricted (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017). Here, we challenge the dominant discourse related to young people, predatory grooming and CCE. Coercion appears more nuanced and often interlinked with friendship, but also the 'pulls' of coercion: income generation and materialism, situated within the context of consumer capitalism and competitive individualism and wider austerity and inequality (Irwin-Rodgers, 2019; Spicer, 2021), thereby highlighting the need to expand and develop Colvin's (2000) theory.

The data illustrated how in many instances young people live bounded and restricted lives, their agency is affected by this, but they do have some control over their decision-making. Furthermore, young people are coerced but are not necessarily reluctant; relevant to the discussion of reluctant gangsters considered earlier (Pitts, 2008). Agency can become 'thickened or thinned' (Klocker, 2007). At the initial stage agency may be 'thick', young people have relative autonomy over their decision-making. Agency is exerted due to friendships, associations and the 'pulls' of county lines discussed earlier. However, the longer a young person is associated with county lines the 'thinner' (Klocker, 2007) their agency becomes; their ability to make decisions becomes bounded and restricted by county lines and the context in which it occurs.

Impersonal coercion

Colvin's DCT provides a way to consider the context of coercion – or *impersonal coercion*. DCT explains how poverty, marginalisation, structural racism and inequality can act as coercive mechanisms. However, inter- and impersonal coercion often combine. For example, a global recession will produce impersonal coercion due to economic pressure while the same time affecting interpersonal coercion, that is, direct actions taken by employers within the workplace (Klocker, 2007). Impersonal coercion also includes coercive relations that are not directly associated with an individual (Klocker, 2007). Imperatively, it is the strength and consistency to which coercion is applied or experienced; more frequent and erratic coercion leads to higher propensity for involvement in crime (Klocker, 2007).

Many of the young people discussed within this study were marginalised, had disengaged from education. Most had experienced poverty and faced previous violence, either at home or on the streets. Social workers and YOT staff described instances of young people who were involved with Children's Services, some were in the Care System, others had long-term allocated social workers. Many of the young people had been convicted of criminal offences and some had served prison sentences for these offences. Others had mental health issues, early-onset behavioural problems and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); many of the young participants had experienced or were experiencing homelessness and its associated vulnerabilities. As Colvin (2000) argues, but also a number of other scholars and theoretical positions (i.e.

Farrington, 2002), the more challenges a young person faces, the more likely they are to engage in crime.

The young people explained how drivers for involvement in county lines is situated within wider issues of poverty and social exclusion and thus in alliance with scholarship that demonstrates deeply embedded structural contradictions, leaving a generation of young people 'dying to live' (Bakkali, 2019). A young woman explained further:

From what I've seen a lot of kids don't know another way out. They wanna do better and there's people who will give them such high hopes and expectations if they do this [county lines] but get hooked on it or they get killed. They say they can get some money, and these kids, they have no money, no food, no water – to even escape, to escape reality, anything.²⁴

This is situated within a pervasive theme of the research which suggests that involvement in county lines and associated financial rewards is related to a young person's desire to 'get out'. The phrase 'getting out' was used to describe a young person's desire to move away from their current living conditions, often related to poverty, inner-city living, and pervasive marginalisation (concurrent with Irwin-Rodgers, 2019). A young woman explained further:

You think I'll only do this for a few months, and then I'll get out. I think a lot of people think this and fall into this trap but once you're in that it's really hard to get out. Maybe you're too deep into it, maybe too many people know your name, you've made enemies by the time you wanna get out and they're not gonna let you leave.²⁵

Associated with 'getting out' is the perception that engagement with county lines is temporary, at least in theory. County lines is considered a short-term solution to earn money and to increase social mobility:

A lot of these kids that become involved in county lines get offered stuff that they can't get at home, and they need the money. The appeal of the money is big, but this kind of thing is normalised, you see people and think he's okay and he's making money and then I can get the money and get out. You think I'm not gonna do it for long, I'm just gonna make some quick money'.

This was particularly pertinent for the young participants facing wider issues related to homelessness and vulnerability. A young woman explained the specific pressures she faces and how this relates to drivers for involvement in county lines:

My hostel, it's where we live, it kind of forces you into that lifestyle. I'm in a hostel for people who are basically homeless and don't really have any other place to go. Everyone here is on benefits but if you get a job, they up the rent to live here goes up to £300 a week and it's crazy and no one can pay that. It's like all your salary will go on rent and food. People don't like going down that route and people look for cash in hand jobs, like selling drugs.²⁶

Despite this, there were divergences in the data, some of the young people came from affluent backgrounds and relatively stable family lives. As a mother explained: 'I knew

about county lines but thinking about kids doing it for money and designer clothes and mobile phones, this was not the case for my son. He had all this, and he had a good, happy family'.²⁷ A Social Worker concurred:

In some cases, we've seen that the parents have really done everything they possibly can, and we've seen the strength of the relationship there but the pressure and the draw outside that, I think that's what defines county lines in a way.²⁸

This was particularly evident in interviews with mothers. Notwithstanding this study included a relatively small number of mothers and, advertising methods (via social media, charities, and NGOs) resulting in recruiting mothers with similar characteristics (i.e. professionals, similar family structures, etc.), in many instances, the young people came from stable and loving families. In contrast to the young people interviewed for this study, the mothers rarely mentioned poverty or deprivation but rather access to education – and often private education, high levels of social inclusion, strong communities – children playing with neighbourhood children, attendance at football clubs, scouts and a wide range of 'extra-curriculum activities'.

These discussions raise important questions. First, the data challenges the homogeneity of impersonal coercion for some young people in some circumstances. Extant discourse suggests that impersonal, or wider contextual factors, lead young people into committing crime (Colvin, 2000). This was reflected in the data gathered with the young people and the criminal justice practitioners, who discussed young people who illustrated multiple risk factors (i.e. discussed in depth in Farrington's research, 2002). However, as the data from the mothers illustrates, this is not necessarily the case for all young people. The discussions of materialism, fast money and the perceptions of a 'type' of lifestyle highlight the 'lure' of county lines. Colvin (2000) argues that is the frequency and nature of coercion that results in involvement in crime. How omnipresent is interpersonal coercion and how does it override what Farrington (2002) argues are 'protective factors' and which support desistance from offending?

Social-psychological deficits

Colvin's DCT (2000) explains how coercion provokes a number of social-psychological deficits which include: anger, low self-control and social bonding and 'coercive ideation', where those once coerced become the coercers. Our data demonstrated alliance with this proposition; all of the young people discussed in the study exhibited issues with anger, difficulties with building social connections and low self-control – deficits which for some, emerged *after* their involvement in county lines. The mothers explained a clear, and often rapid, change in their sons' behaviour, following engagement/coercion and which included abusive language, physical threats and violent outbursts. For many, this was in contrast to previous behaviour. For example, 'he turned into I child I didn't recognise. He was moody, aggressive. He went from a lovely intelligent grammar school-boy to a criminal job in the space of 6 months'.²⁹ Another mother concurred: 'I don't recognise him now. He was a lovely boy and so funny. But all of a sudden, he started to become violent with me, here we are 6 years later – he's just awful'.³⁰

One of the main components of Colvin's (2000) theory is that criminals who were once coerced go on to coerce others. The more times a person experiences coercion, the more likely they are to develop social-psychosocial deficits discussed earlier – and coerce others (Colvin, 2000). One of the young people described the complexity of the issue, the effects of county lines and consequent decision-making:

The thing is it's not just about your life, your body that can be taken its your soul that can be taken by involving yourself in stuff like this. Because, piece by piece the more you've got to do, the more you've got to hurt someone, whether you've got to rob someone, whether you've got to burn something to the ground a little bit of you gets taken, piece by piece.³¹

This relates to the notion of a 'spiral of coercion' as a mother explained: 'He manages other kids now. He doesn't go out so often but has 5 phones with him 24-7. He has turned from a child victim to a monster who now ruins other children's lives'.³² A Social Worker described a similar situation:

He was a secretive but polite young man, but we saw him recruit one of our young people. There were issues at home but if you look at the big picture, they would have been considered the perfect family with just a divorce, nothing unusual. They live in a £750,000 house; Mum was a PA in London; Dad had a big business. But Dad walked and left Mum to bring up the children. He Jake³³ obviously felt left down by this. Jake has four convictions. Possession of class A, stolen car. For one of the offences, he was bailed because of his National Referral Mechanism. Mum provided lots of information, she'd taken photo evidence of burn marks, cuts, damage to the property, threats made to the family. So, the Judge thought he was being coerced. When Jake was bailed, he was caught in a stolen car, not driving, he had coerced a really vulnerable young person into driving the car because he can't drive a manual, but this young boy could. The boy was 14, Jake had offered him £400 and he was like, well it's £400, I need the money, he was in care but wasn't involved in the drugs or the gangs or anything.

This case study illustrates a number of important issues, first, interpersonal coercion – threats and acts of violence towards Jake. The case also questions the homogeneity of impersonal coercion; Jake experienced the effects of the divorce of his parents but did not necessarily face coercion in the form of marginalisation, poverty or structural inequality, or coercion in the family home, due to parental involvement in criminality and/or abuse. In addition, the case study outlines the often-complex dichotomy between victim and offender status; young people occupy both positions, often moving from being a victim and *being* coerced into a perpetrator and *doing* the coercion. The same sentiment was observed by a YOT manager:

One of the young people I work with is serving 15 years for involvement in weapon related violence. He moved quickly from victim to offender. He went to a private school, had a relatively stable family but he liked the status county lines gave him and the money. You have to ask, where is the tipping point for someone like him?³⁴

Divergences; hyper-contexts and coercion online

This article has discussed a number of convergences with Colvin's (2000) theory including the importance of considering coercion as multi-faceted, occurring in both

inter-and-impersonal contexts, the notions of social-psychological deficits that arise as a result of coercion and the effects of this on the ‘spiral of coercion’; how those who were once coerced become the coercers. The following section considers divergences from DCT. These include coercion online (in the context of materialism and consumer capitalism) and within ‘hyper-contexts’.

It is widely acknowledged that social media plays an integral part of young people’s lives. Numerous studies have illustrated how teenagers are likely to own a smart phone and use social media, via their phones to communicate and connect with their peers (Cano et al., 2014). The term Web 2.0 has been coined to refer to the second generation of Internet usage and reflects the growing interconnectedness of online social media; public life has moved online (Boyd, 2014). Risks posed to young people online include cyber-bullying, ‘sexting’, child sexual exploitation (Boyd, 2014) and coercion into county lines.

Colvin (2000) argues coercion is delivered in various forms and in a range of coercive environments. However, 20 years on from Colvin’s study a clear discrepancy appears. The Internet and particularly social media have produced a new coercive environment—a forum where inter-and impersonal coercion meet. As Colvin argues, the more erratic and recurrent coercion the more likely a person is to develop social-psychological deficits and move from the coerced and into the coercer. Social media, inequality and the effects of consumer capitalism adds complexity to this multifarious landscape and, in doing so, provides further opportunities for coercion to occur.

Extant research suggests that the combination of ‘drug prohibition, consumer capitalism, severe levels of inequality and issues surrounding social media have led to a toxic trap’ (Irwin-Rodgers, 2019: 591) which facilitates and encourages young people’s involvement in county lines. These contextual factors are aligned with the lack of opportunities for young people and preoccupation with ‘hyper-wealth’, social media influencers and the discrepancy between lives portrayed online and the realities of young people facing marginalisation and poverty in the United Kingdom today (Irwin-Rodgers, 2019). Coercion online occurs via social media platforms, music and video games. This coercion occurs directly and indirectly. For example, social media is used as a mechanism to engage young people in county lines, often by use of videos which publicise county lines, its financial rewards and the status of gang members, as well as for communication purposes, and control, via monitoring and manipulation (Storrod and Densley, 2017). In alliance with this, our data provide limited support for coercion via established notions of grooming. The NSPCC (2000: 1) explains how ‘young people can be groomed online by a stranger or someone they know. The relationship a groomer builds can include a romantic relationship, as a mentor, an authority figure or a dominant and persistent figure’. The explanation is embedded within ‘predator-victim type grooming’; we found limited support for this form of grooming. Rather than hiding their identities county lines coercion occurs openly, with those doing the coercing publicising a certain *type* of lifestyle, associated with street capital, hyper-consumerism, money and respect (aligned with discussions of gang subcultures considered earlier, and Storrod and Densley, 2017 research).

As Irwin-Rodgers (2019: 593) argues ‘many young people seem utterly captivated by consumer capitalism’s status symbols. Their obsession with publicly displaying the

money and material possessions acquired from involvement in drug dealing masks and is driven by a deeper sense of anxiety and inequality that permeates these young people's lives'. This relates to earlier discussions of drivers for involvement in county lines, notions that county lines provides 'quick' money and young people's desire to 'get out' and increase their social mobility. A young person explained further:

You see the social media life and you wanna be a part of it and quick money. It's the flashy lifestyle, the cars, the Instagram models, young people making money – money that can be made so quickly in a short amount of time. You see people online, posting money, posting reward pictures of crackheads outside of London, showing how to make money, holding up money, they hold up thousands and young people think I can be doing that too.³⁵

Social media has led to a wider accessibility of contacts, new peer groups and potential vulnerability. This illustrates a divergence from Colvin's (2000) DCT; the merger between inter-and-impersonal coercion. Colvin argues that interpersonal coercion includes direct actions towards individuals; impersonal coercion provides a context to coercion but is not directly associated with an individual. Pre-Web 2.0 this distinction was relatively easy to make, post 2.0 things have become more complex. A YOT manager explained how Snapchat is used for 'broadcast messaging': 'They literally just send out messages like, come get your gelato or come get your lemon ice, you can earn £400 if you respond. Then the messages disappear, they're there for an hour and then they're gone'.³⁶ The practitioners explained how Sam³⁷ (14) replied to a similar message and provided his father's bank details (and home address) to 'transfer the funds'. Sam was asked to 'deliver packages' [drugs] to earn the money but was unable to do so. A group of young men arrived at Sam's house, he became involved in other 'deliveries' to pay back the money and avoid threats of violence, thus illustrating coercion into county lines via a seemingly innocent engagement method, thus demonstrating amalgamation between inter-and-impersonal coercion. The aim of the Snapchat messages is impersonal and not directed at an individual; however, the result is interpersonal, illustrating multiple coercive actions aided by a new coercive environment, Web 2.0.

An important divergence from Colvin's account relates to immersion in popular social culture as a form of grooming associated with a young person's ability to exert agency. Within this context grime and/or drill music becomes a compounding factor. A young person explained further:

When you're a kid growing up and you hear these rappers saying they've got all the money, the women, the cars. Especially in grime. I'm not putting all of the blame on grime, I enjoy grime, I love the songs, but the rappers have loads of cash, like literal loads of cash and they've got all these cars and the lyrics talk about how they made it out of the estate. In the songs they rap about trapping [selling drugs]; you start thinking trapping is an easy way to make money.³⁸

The data highlight how grime music may affect a young person directly but is indirect or impersonal in its nature and thus in alliance with existing scholarship that demonstrates an ambiguous relationship between drill music and crime (Ilan, 2020). Social media broadcasts can directly influence a young person but are aimed at a wider or

impersonal audience. Violent video games that glamorise county lines affect an individual via interpersonal coercion, but their aim is impersonal and wider reaching, linked to amusement, profit, and so on. This merger between the inter-and-impersonal provides superfluous opportunities for coercion and, as Colvin (2000) argues, the more coercion conveyed via multiple sources, the higher likelihood a young person is to develop social-psychosocial deficits and engage in crime.

The nature of building connections and spending time online reflects a 'hyper-reality'; closely associated with experiences of trauma and which result in 'hyper-vigilant' behaviour. A YOT manager explained further: A young person in county lines can experience multiple different traumas. Even if they stab someone, that's still a traumatic incident. We often see post-traumatic stress disorder kind of symptoms. They're hyper-vigilant, very focused on all their surroundings, always on the lookout.³⁹

This relates closely to the formation of 'hyper-realities':

I think young people would always describe that it's like a hyper-reality for them. They can be at the top one minute and down at the bottom the next minute, everything is constantly changing. I used to run support groups and we started banning young people having their phones in the group. We realised though, that for them, if they didn't have their phones on them, within that hour that they were with us, something could have changed significantly in the scene outside and which could put them at significant risk when they left that building. We sometimes say that's it's like they run the stock market tickertape, it's constant change. That's why we see lots of drug use, to try and bring them down. You don't see a huge amount of stimulant use, because they're already stimulated by their environment.⁴⁰

This illustrates a new 'forum' for coercive behaviour and questions the distinction between inter-and-impersonal coercion. In doing so, it illustrates 'hyper-coercion'. Mechanisms for communication, building connections and reality are blurred. Colvin (2000) argues that erratic coercion leads to greater levels on involvement in crime. A key component of 'erratic coercion' is inconsistency which often leads to anger, social isolation and confusion. Social media amplifies grooming and coercion online is inherently inconsistent – illustrative of Web 2.0 and the fluid and transitional nature of online connections. Inconsistency in this context is closely associated with hyper-realities which at their core, are ambiguous and virtually impossible to navigate; thus, posing many questions about the effects on coercion online and young people's propensity to involvement in crime. County lines coercion is nuanced and occurs within 'hyper' contexts that normalise violence and associated with wider subcultural practices of gangs, as well as wider, coercive norms, associated with youth subcultures and music (particularly drill/grime music), social media and video games that promote violence. These factors are neither exclusively interpersonal nor impersonal; instead – the integration of the interpersonal and impersonal is necessary in this context.

Recommendations for research, policy and practice

Colvin's (2000) theory is important in a number of ways. First, it draws on criminological theory to focus specifically on coercion and in doing so expands understanding of

drivers for involvement in crime. Both the convergences and divergences discussed in this article require greater consideration; the specific inclusion of the Internet as a new coercive environment, notions of erratic coercion and 'hyper-realities' would all benefit from further exploration.

The potential (and understandable) paternalism illustrated in the parent and practitioner data risks obscuring our understanding of young people's agency. As we highlight, young people who engage in county lines do have some agency over their decision-making, particularly at the early stages. However, as county lines progresses so too does the 'thinning' (Klocker, 2007) of agency, making it desistance difficult and unlikely. There are lacunas between criminological theory and understanding of children's agency (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2019), which requires further consideration, particularly in the context of county lines.

Colvin (2000) argues that to address coercion and consequent offending and prevent the spiral of coercion, strategies for intervention should be designed at both inter-and-impersonal levels, thus 'changing the immediate and larger contexts that perpetuate coercion while also altering the individual's social-psychological characteristics that have developed through the dynamics of coercion' (p. 2). This article provides support for this but advocates an expansion of the framework to include the Internet/virtual reality and social media as new coercive environments. This is closely related to Contextual Safeguarding where Firmin (2020) proposes that we consider harm posed by those around young people, including gangs, organised crime and county lines. How then might these discussions of multi-faceted coercion intersect with Contextual Safeguarding? In addition, and as the practitioners in the study explained, in many instances, 'the system isn't quick enough to be able to protect the child'⁴¹ and services are not always closely aligned. As the article has discussed, coercion into county lines is often rapid, how can research, policy and practice adapt to be as quick, and effective enough to respond to this incredibly challenging terrain? Furthermore, there are implications for wider and often dominant narratives, associated with CCE and which focus on 'powerless victims and predatory offenders'. This discourse fails to reflect upon how young people exhibit agency (Spicer, 2021), often as a response to marginalisation and exclusion, embedded within the pressures of modernity and consumer capitalism (Irwin-Rodgers, 2019). Thus, questioning how social and political policies and agendas could be developed to move away from notions 'coerced victims' and into more nuanced and expansive debate about the drivers for engagement in county lines, and the impact and effects of austerity, structural violence and acute marginalisation faced by many young people in the United Kingdom today (Irwin-Rodgers, 2019).

Conclusion

Drawing on data gathered from practitioners, mothers of sons involved in county lines and young people, the article considered convergences with Colvin's (2000) DCT; coercion as multi-faceted, occurring on both interpersonal and impersonal levels, the development of socio-psychological deficits and coercive ideation, when the coerced becomes the coercer. This progresses dominant discourse that depicts county lines coercion as grooming that occurs only at the initial stages of involvement in crime. Colvin's theory

expands understanding by considering the ‘differential’ nature of coercion, the more frequent and erratic coercion the higher propensity for involvement in crime.

The article questions the homogeneity of impersonal coercion in certain contexts and considered divergences from Colvin’s theory including ‘hyper-contexts’, the exertion of agency to acquire fast money and material gains (situated within a wider context of consumer capitalism, materialism and widespread inequality) and coercion online. Since the publication of DCT in 2000 much has changed, including the reliance of social connections, communication and crime via online formats, including social media. This article also discussed ways in which social media offers a new coercive environment and illustrates a merger between the inter-and-impersonal coercion – new arenas for coercion to occur. Colvin’s theory is ‘differential’ because it explains ‘the key independent variable for understanding criminality is the degree of coercion (in both its strength and consistency) experienced by individuals’ (p. 5). Thus, it is the frequency and nature of coercion that relates to propensity to commit violence or engage in county lines. Young people experience interpersonal coercion, and often erratically but social media has become a new coercive environment providing new opportunities for erratic, *hyper-coercion*, leading to higher frequencies and higher propensity for engagement in county lines. County lines related coercion is rapid, an outcome of hyper-vigilant behaviour closely associated with trauma and interlinked with social media. The pace of which county lines coercion occurs is strikingly fast, illustrative of the realities of young people’s lives today.

Questions are posed about the future of young people embroiled in county lines. Colvin argues for more expansive methods to tackle inter-and-impersonal coercion, and this article provides support this; however, the move of criminal enterprises online, the use of different forms of technology and a greater reliance on online social connections mean that in many ways, practice is far behind reality. Young people are navigating fast-paced often terrifying social terrains, where coercion occurs on both inter-and-impersonal levels and in a multitude of social environments. County lines related coercion is complex and concerning; there is a need for better understanding of the nuances of coercion, as well as young people’s agency – alongside more robust and expansive efforts to address wider contextual issues of marginalisation, hyper-capitalism, consumerism and the effects of social media in order to better protect young people and halt the spread of county lines.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by The University of Westminster ‘Research Communities Fund’.

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Notes

1. BBC (2019).
2. The terms children and young people are used interchangeably within this article to illustrate how county lines related coercion can affect those aged 8–18 and above.
3. The name of the organisation is intentionally excluded from this publication to protect the anonymity of the participants.
4. Parent interview 2.
5. Semi-structured interview 18 (young people).
6. Parent interview 1.
7. Parent interview 17.
8. Semi-structured interview 15 (young people).
9. Focus group 1.
10. Unstructured interview 2.
11. Unstructured interview 2.
12. Semi-structured interview 18 (young people).
13. Focus group 3.
14. Semi-structured interview 15 (young people).
15. Focus group 3.
16. Semi-structured interview 19 (young people).
17. Focus group 2.
18. Focus group 3.
19. Focus group 1.
20. Semi-structured interview 20 (young people).
21. Semi-structured interview 20.
22. Semi-structured interview 18 (young people).
23. Semi-structured interview 19 (young people).
24. Semi-structured interview 15 (young people).
25. Semi-structured interview 16 (young people).
26. Semi-structured interview 16 (young people).
27. Parent interview 13.
28. Focus group 3.
29. Parent interview 2.
30. Parent interview 1.
31. Semi-structured interview 15 (young people).
32. Parent interview 1.
33. Not his real name.
34. Focus group 1.
35. Semi-structured interview 20 (young people).
36. Focus group 4.
37. Not his real name.
38. Semi-structured interview 16 (young people).
39. Focus group 4.
40. Focus group 3.
41. Focus group 2.

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