



Article

# Hyper-agency and county lines

Theoretical Criminology

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## Abstract

The article considers the decision-making and actions of young people engaged in county lines. By drawing on data gathered with practitioners and young people associated with a homeless charity in London, the article argues that in convergence with existing theory, the agency that young people exhibit is ambiguous, blurring the boundaries of what children should and should not do. Agency is also tactical; the thoughts and actions taken by young people have a purpose, linked to profit generation, social inclusion and protection. In addition, young people's ability to act and make decisions is embedded within wider notions of hyper-consumerism, hyper-realities and lives lived online. To explore this further, the article proposes the notion of 'hyper-agency'.

## Keywords

county lines, agency, hyper-agency, gangs, organised crime

## Introduction

Drug trafficking has a significant impact on the United Kingdom (UK), in terms of crime and harm (NCA, 2024b). It is closely related to organised crime, including firearms offences and modern slavery (NCA, 2024b). Drug selling is shaped by movement and monopolisation of markets (Coomber, 2015). This means that different places across the UK have local variants in how drugs are trafficked and sold (Coomber, 2015). Although 'traditional' face-to-face drug selling remains a prominent model of distribution in many parts of the UK (Coomber and Moyle, 2018), drug markets and the movement of drugs have evolved, from urban to rural areas and from cities to provisional markets, often involving children and young people (Harding, 2020). In the UK, this form of

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drug selling in provincial areas is known as ‘county lines’. The UK Government (2023: 1) defines county lines as:

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 often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.

Research suggests there is a relationship between county lines and child criminal exploitation and it is now common to see drug dealing gangs sentenced under modern slavery legislation (NCA, 2024a; UK Government, 2023). Alongside such accounts, there has been a growth in academic literature on county lines in Scotland, Merseyside (UK Government, 2023), London and in other parts of the UK. The research has examined the violence associated with drug selling, the role of gangs, organised crime (Windle and Briggs, 2015) and the impact of social media (Storrod and Densley, 2017). Scholars have also documented the exploitation of vulnerable people in these criminal enterprises (Spicer, 2018).

Despite this body of work, gaps in knowledge remain. Specifically, we know little about decision-making among those participating in this form of drug selling, or the ‘social agency’ of those who do so (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012). Understanding agency has dominated discourse related to children and young people since 1989 and the introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Honwana and De Boeck, 2005). Embedded within wider discussions of agency (Giddens, 1984), the ‘new social studies of childhood’ prioritises young people’s decision-making, and considers young people as ‘social actors’ (James et al., 1998: 207). This approach has changed the landscape of childhood studies and the responses to children and young people. However, to date, the framework of agency has yet to be applied to discussions of county lines.

To address this lacuna, this article starts with a discussion of the dominant theories of agency, largely derived from the Global South. These theories draw on work with young people engaged in war or organised crime. Although distinct from county lines, there are similarities between street children’s involvement in organised crime in Bangladesh (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2019), child soldiers in Africa (Honwana, 2015) and these new drug markets in the UK. In all instances, young people are embroiled in the lower echelons of organised crime groups, often amid constrained circumstances and with limited and restricted agency (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2019).

The article develops an integrated framework of agency suitable for explaining decision-making within a county lines context. In convergence with existing research, I find that young people exhibit an ambiguous form of agency (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012). They are often tactical (Honwana, 2015), their decisions have a purpose, linked to profit generation, social inclusion and protection (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017). Their views also change over time (Klocker, 2007). In divergence from extant theory, I document specific forms of agency, embedded within wider notions of hyper-consumerism, hyper-realities and lives lived online. I refer to this set of beliefs, justifications and motivations as ‘hyper-agency’.

## Agency and county lines

Since the introduction of the UNCRC (1989) scholars and practitioners have considered children to be 'active in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live' (James and Prout, 1990: 8), highlighting the importance of young people as 'makers and breakers' of communities (Honwana and De Boeck, 2005). The idea that children are not passive actors in an adult world but instead 'agents – capable of acting' (Whitehead et al., 2007) signified an important step in moving away from paternalism and towards participation (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012). However, agency is far from homogenous. Notions of agency are often abstract and applied simplistically, missing the complexities of children's lives and the context in which decision-making occurs (Leonard, 2015). An individual's ability to make decisions reflects the complex interplay between the structures and rules already in place within a society and a person's desire to achieve their own goals and ensure social autonomy (Leonard, 2015). As Whitehead et al. (2007) argue, it is imperative that we move away from the notion that children 'have agency' and develop understandings of how children 'exert agency' often in constrained circumstances.

The focus on agency initiated widespread critical debate regarding 'common dualisms' including the victim–offender dichotomy (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012), with specific reference to 'out of place' youth, or those who do not fit within normative (and often Global North) conceptualisations of children and childhoods (Liebel, 2020). As Bordonaro and Payne (2012: 366) argue, difficulties arise when decision-making occurs in war or crime where 'agency amongst children and youth is in stark contrast to established and normative conceptions about childhood and moral and social ideals about the kind of behaviour young people should demonstrate'. It is thus imperative to consider 'contexts where children and youth threaten and challenge the existing moral and social order, sometimes in overtly violent ways' (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012: 43) to deconstruct 'iconic and moral ideals of childhood' (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012), deeply embedded within wider notions of modernity and colonialism and the construction of certain types of childhood, largely reflective of Global North realities (Liebel, 2020).

'Ambiguous agency' (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012) helps to explain how children challenge normative notions of childhood, existing and exerting agency in 'ambiguous activities'. Bordonaro and Payne (2012) question agency for child soldiers or children involved in violence or conflict, illustrating how for many young people, agency is celebrated and encouraged, but only in terms of positive or pro-social activities; when they engage in crime or war, exerting agency becomes more complicated. Montgomery (2011), in her writing about child prostitutes in Thailand, explains how young people who sell sex, engage in crime, live on the streets and commit violent behaviour are 'problems' for society, causing disgust and create naive expectations that children should inhabit only places of innocence, education and play.

Other research on child soldiers offers different conceptualisations (Honwana, 2015; Klocker, 2007). Honwana (2015: 50) describes how these youths 'exist in an ambiguous state of being simultaneously children and soldiers' and proposes 'tactical agency':

Despite the fact that the majority of them [child soldiers] have been forced to enter the military, they are not empty vessels into whom violence is poured. Having started as victims, many of

them are converted into the perpetrators of the most violent and atrocious deeds. In this transformation process they also exercise agency of their own – a ‘tactical agency’, an agency of the weak – which is sporadic, and mobile, and seizes every opportunity that allows them to cope with the constraints imposed upon them.

Honwana’s research illustrates the ‘simultaneous state of being’ of child soldiers, positioning them as ‘tactical agents’ rather than senseless killers or blameless victims and highlighting the constraints on children’s lives, of war, conflict but also age, gender and social marginalisation (Whitehead et al., 2007). Klocker (2007) considers how agency changes. In some instances, young people have a greater ability, or autonomy over their decision-making, and their agency is ‘thickened’, whereas in other instances children’s agency is ‘thinned’ – constrained.

Elsewhere, I have argued that we should consider the purpose of decision-making and an individual’s ability to have control over their own lives (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017). In fieldwork with street children in Bangladesh, I found that it was imperative for young people to exercise what I called ‘protective agency’ – to ensure their survival on the streets. Together with other scholars, my work supports the view that agency is multi-faceted. It takes various forms and different (individual) interpretations, situated within the boundaries between organised crime, gangs and wider conflict (Hagedorn, 2014).

Research has begun to explore young people’s involvement in county lines, questioning their involvement in ‘ambiguous activities’. Robinson et al. (2019), for example, discuss the ways in which young people are coerced into drug selling by debt bondage, but also because it offers ‘financial and status rewards’. Drawing on Sykes and Matza (1957), they deploy the notion of ‘neutralisation of exploitation’ to explain the ways in which, particularly young men, neutralise the harms caused by county lines and ‘reject the victim label to profess that drug dealing was their own rational choice.’ County lines is a survival strategy, others argue (Moyle, 2019; Windle et al., 2020), or a mechanism to earn an income (Atkinson-Sheppard et al., 2023). Elsewhere, scholars have identified how social media is used as a ‘control and manipulation’ strategy among county lines-related criminality (Storrod and Densley, 2017) and have explored the relationship between drug selling and paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, questioning how agency is exerted amid complex social contexts (Walsh, 2023).

Young people are drawn into county lines by the threat of violence and exploitation (Atkinson-Sheppard et al., 2023). Once subsumed into this form of criminality, they tend to adhere to subcultural norms that are closely aligned with street capital (Harding, 2020), ‘hyper-masculine road culture’ (Moyle, 2019), and ‘street fantasies’ (Hallsworth, 2013) that reinforce exaggerated and hyper-constructs of county lines, illustrated on social media, in rap music, videos and online (Ilan, 2020). For many, this form of activity is an enticing prospect, offering mechanisms to earn an income, amid wider issues of social exclusion and constrained circumstances (Fleetwood, 2014; Moyle, 2019). Finally, extant literature often considers people as either victims or offenders, mirroring dualisms that often underpin discussions of children and young people within a decontextualised, often superficial framework (Moyle, 2019; Spicer, 2018). The wider context of marginalisation is often missed from the debate (Reid, 2022).

## Research methods

This study draws from interviews with 46 participants. I conducted semi-structured interviews (four) with senior managers within the Youth Offending Service and at a homeless charity in London. I also conducted four focus groups with 20 youth offending team workers, social workers and charity workers, all of whom support people at various stages of their involvement in county lines. I then carried out semi-structured interviews with 22 young people (aged 18–24 years) associated with a homeless charity in London. Their ethnicities were: Black African (3), Black British (6), Asian (4), White British (5), White Irish (3) and Eastern European (1). The participants live in hostels or sheltered accommodation, and all had experience of county lines but to varying degrees: some had previous involvement in drug selling, others had close family or friends who were engaged in county lines, some had witnessed this activity, including the recruitment of other young people into drug selling. These data were collected over a period of 12 months, between January 2022 and January 2023.

The study adheres to the University of Westminster and British Psychological Society codes of ethical conduct. All participants provided informed consent (they were all given an information sheet and signed a consent form). A ‘research sensitivity protocol’ supported the study. This included 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. Access was supported by a ‘gatekeeper’ at the homeless charity.<sup>1</sup> The gatekeeper worked with the principal investigator to identify and recruit participants suitable for inclusion in the study. Access to the practitioners was supported by the principal investigator’s existing working relationships.

The interview questions explored the nature of county lines and the four theories of agency discussed earlier (ambiguous agency, tactical agency, thick and thin agency and protective agency). With the practitioners, I introduced the four theories and then held a wider discussion of their applicability. We then discussed how the theories applied or not to the young people they support. Their discussions were thus based on secondary experiences, reflective of their roles as practitioners. It was not feasible to follow the same process with the young people. Instead, I developed questions that included elements of the four theories and proceeded to explore the participant’s responses to these questions. These discussions were based on individual perceptions and experiences. There were two sets of resulting data, which were analysed individually. The analysis considered the convergences and divergences with the four theories and highlighted a gap in the literature related to the relationship between county lines and hyper-realities, hyper-consumerism and micro-agency. This led to the notion of a hyper-agency, the focus of this article.

## Findings and discussion

### *Agency and county lines*

The practitioners used the term county lines to describe drug selling, its relationship to child exploitation and the movement of drugs, often from urban to rural areas. By

contrast, the young people were largely unfamiliar with the term, requiring me at times to explain what it meant before commencing our discussions. However, the notion of selling drugs and monopolising new areas for drug markets, including moving from urban areas to more rural vicinities was very familiar to them.

The terminology used by the young people included: 'shotting', going 'cunch' or 'OT' (out of town). They portrayed a complex picture, in which drug dealing and the associated movement of drugs are normalised and intertwined with lives, livelihoods and growing up in urban areas. This finding reflects scholarship on urban violence, marginalisation and exclusion that argues for a move away from labelling young people involved in criminality and a more expansive focus on structural factors which lead to offending in the first place (Bakkali, 2019; Reid, 2022). Despite this, and for the purposes of clarity, the article continues to use the terminology of 'county lines' to describe the movement of drugs from urban to rural areas, but it does so interchangeably with 'drug selling' to reflect the data and the divergence in conceptualisation of the phenomenon from both the practitioner and young person's perspectives.

There was a consensus that young people engage in drug selling tactically, considering the benefits of doing so: money, survival, inclusion and adherence to a certain 'type' of lifestyle, often portrayed online and embedded within hyper-consumerism. This view aligns with Honwana (2015)'s tactical agency, exerted in bounded and restricted circumstances, by young people facing poverty, marginalisation and exclusion as Oliver, aged 18<sup>2</sup> explained:

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. If you've got a good line, you can make a lot of money. You start small, but it's word of mouth, you say yeah take my number, that's added to selling in London and then if you have a line outside of London, you're making a lot of money. (Semi-structured interview 20)

Another participant, Tommy, aged 23, reflected on his previous experience:

When I was younger say 15 or something people used to come up to me all the time and say look man, you wanna make some money? They'd say, there's this place, you go up there for a little bit, hold on to something and you get £5000 a week. I've had people buying me stuff and saying just do this and you'll get this stuff all the time. 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 that but two weeks later they started trying to hang out with me stuff like that ... and then said, like you gotta move these drugs. (Semi-structured interview 4)

Tommy's experience illustrates how young people try to exert tactical agency. He sought to earn money, yet he also faced coercion. In this way, coercion and tactical agency combine to provide a more nuanced understanding of decision-making. Other participants explained how drug selling is often considered a short-term fix. One of the young people, Natalya described matters like this: 'It's like a mantra everyone says,

I'm not gonna do it for long, I'm just gonna make some quick money' (semi-structured interview 8). In many instances, money was needed for material possessions, like phones, cars and trainers because young people face increasing pressure to 'keep up' with images portrayed among peers and on social media (Irwin-Rodgers, 2019). In some instances, the images portrayed online relate to a 'hyper-masculinity', where drug dealers are presented online with guns, knives, cars and women (also replicated in music videos and online games) (Coomber and Moyle, 2017; Moyle, 2019). Involvement in county lines is also seen as a mechanism to survive and to support one's family as Aidan, aged 22, explained further:

Their families are riding on them. I think the risk involved is considered but it's just ignored because there's higher demands. For example, people I've known have siblings who haven't been able to eat unless they go and do this, because even if they do, do it legally, it's still not going to be enough. They *feel* the burden of these types of family issues. (Semi-structured interview 5)

For some, drug selling was thought to provide money to 'get out', a phrase used commonly among the participants to describe their desire to move away from their current living situations, often in overcrowded accommodation, in urban areas, facing poverty, marginalisation, issues with family and peers, and so on. Nathanael, aged 21, described how:

... you wanna move to nice neighbourhoods, to get your own place your own house. I think for guys in gangs I've heard them say, I wanna move my mum out, I wanna move her out to a house, I wanna get so rich I can move to the South of France, get a chateau! Estates are not very nice places to live, the living conditions are not great so having your own place to call home is like a sign of status. Who wouldn't want to live in like Essex or somewhere like that. It's having those people around you, all you can hear is fighting and drama going on, you wanna move out to a nice area. (Semi-structured interview 16)

This account echoes with Reid's (2022: 168) recent work with young men, many of whom 'become trapped in difficult lifeworld's and identities'. The theme of 'getting out' was prominent within the current study, linked to freedom, masculinity, autonomy and having control over finances. Young people make a tactical decision to engage in county lines, often because of the financial rewards; however, in many instances they are unaware of the risks involved. Jayden, aged 24, described how:

Everything's glorified. It's all about the money, so another young person has probably come back saying stuff like, yeah, I just made this money, I'm going to go buy myself five new pairs of trainers or whatever. They're not going to come back saying someone tried to run up in the house. The older lots won't tell the youngsters because they need these boys to go out and do this stuff. (Semi-structured interview 21)

This theme of deception was apparent in many of the interviews and although some young people sold drugs for the financial benefits, others were driven to do so from fear and coercion. Oliver, aged 18, explained further:

They quickly get stuck in an endless cycle because they tell a new youth recruit, I've got a special job for you because I trust you, and they give them say a brick of coke. But then they stitch them up by sending their own boys all 'balled up' [facial identity concealed] to rob the youth recruit so that the youth is in debt to them for pretty much the rest of their life. (Semi-structured interview 20)

The 'debt bondage' described by Oliver highlights the complex relationship between protection and coercion. As the quotation illustrates, initial recruitment may offer young people a sense of solidarity and protection but matters quickly become more complicated. As the young people's agency changes, it 'thickens and thins' (Klocker, 2007) and is far from homogenous (Giddens, 1984). As I argue below, their experiences are shaped by what I refer to as 'hyper-agency'.

### *Hyper-agency*

There are three main components of hyper-agency. The first is 'hyper-consumerism'. Neoliberalism and consumer capitalism leads to competitive individualism and 'extravagant hyper-consumption' (Irwin-Rodgers, 2019). Young people face increasing pressure to conform to society's ideals of success, often related to possessions, money, power and influence (Irwin-Rodgers, 2019). Inequality and austerity (OECD, 2018) lead to conditions in which criminality, including county lines, thrives (Irwin-Rodgers, 2019; Spicer, 2021). Kayson, one of the young people, explained how:

Nowadays people just wanna look nice, it's all about competition, how to raise money who has the nicest cars, clothes. It's really easy to manipulate the youngers into shotting [drug selling], they can be easily influenced by saying, you can make this money, you can have this lifestyle. (Semi-structured interview 13)

Aki, aged 21, concurred:

It's the Gucci belts and the cool new shoes and the brand-new phones and stuff like that. And then when you were shotting you have two phones, that was cool, that kind of thing. It's like a status thing. (Semi-structured interview 10)

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'.

The second component relates to hyper-realities. In 1994, Baudrillard proposed the notion of 'hyper-reality'. He argued that life in post-modern societies is a simulacrum, or a result of 'constructed reality', a reality that is subjective and distorted. There is no clear distinction between what is real and what is fiction, or created for consumption in the media, social media, and so on. This concept has particular relevance and resonance now, especially for adolescents whose development is closely related to digital play.



Gaming, social media and digital worlds are omnipresent in many young people's lives, often from an early age (Verdoodt et al., 2020). Virtual worlds and 'street fantasies' (Hallsworth, 2013) reinforce and glamorise involvement in crime, including county lines (Ilan, 2020). Young social influencers work within this online space, including those who sell drugs and illicit lifestyles, merging the boundaries between criminals and social influencers (van der Hof et al., 2020). Social media is used as a tool for connection, recruitment, and to sell drugs and publicise a certain 'type' of lifestyle, associated with money, status and possessions (Atkinson-Sheppard et al., 2023). Matters are not just symbolic, however, instead, as Storrod and Densley (2017: 14) make clear, coercion online, relies on 'embarrassing or incriminating images, videos, screen shots of messages and voice notes are used to ensure compliance'.

Yet, drug selling is often far from the glamorised lifestyle depicted online. This was discussed with the practitioners in one of the focus groups:

It's really interesting, because I think young people would always describe to us that it's like a hyper-reality for them, in terms of for themselves in this situation, like county lines. It's that you can be at the top one minute, you can be down at the bottom the next minute, everything is constantly changing ... One of the things when I used to run groups, when we started was with banning young people having their phones in groups when we've run it ... then we realised 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 within that hour in the scene outside, which put them at significant risk when they left that building, if they didn't know. (Focus group 1, practitioners)

At a micro level, hyper-realities and agency combine resulting in a 'hyper-sense' of being, of hyper-vigilance, of rapid thought processes, of paranoid thinking of 'watching your back'.

This relates to subcultures that prioritise hyper-masculinity and 'hyper-masculine road culture' (Moyle, 2019), an adherence to norms and values that promote and celebrate violence and aggression, contextualising discussions of agency. In this environment, decision-making is 'hyper': fast and quick, agency is exerted in hyper-contexts. This final echelon relates specifically to the ways in which drug gangs operate, their organisations, hierarchies and the realities of 'trapping' on the streets, all of which help to build a picture of agency, affected by hyper-vigilance and ambiguity. As Nathanael, one of the young people explained, county lines 'is such a sketchy and risky job, it's more demanding mentally than other jobs (semi-structured interview 16).

Part of what makes this world a hyper-reality relates to the clandestine and hierarchical character of drug selling. The participants described 'pyramid' systems in which young people often operate at the lowest echelon as 'runners.' Amida, aged 24, felt that 'everyone's linked somehow, it's about who you know, you'll be selling for someone. There's always someone ahead of you' (semi-structured interview 17). This system provides a mechanism for drug selling; however, 'shotters' (drug sellers) regularly operate in unclear territories with blurred boundaries of risk, agency and responsibility. Nathanael, aged 21, explained:

It's really complex. Like you could have a dealer who gets his drugs from another dealer and that dealer could get it straight from a semi-supplier (big time dealer). That middle dealer is technically the middleman and eventually he could be cut out of the equation or just runs the risk of being cut because he's not necessary. But the dealer could have several runners and those runners could be trying to have their own runners themselves. (Semi-structured interview 16).

The nature of county lines is volatile and challenging to navigate, as outlined by Jack, aged 21:

A boss in a safe location takes a call, then sends instructions to the runner. If a runner performs well, he might get promoted. Although what role would there be for him to get promoted to? The guy at the top will stay at the top ... a promotion might be to managing other runners, or even a house. (Semi-structured interview 15)

Jack went on to explain how payment is uncertain; 'runners' can be paid per 'shift' and can get additional funds (semi-structured interview 15), but this is dependent on who is running the line and responsible for disseminating the profit. Nathanael, aged 21 described further:

They only get paid if the runner makes even. Well no only if they make a profit. If a dealer gives his runner £400 street price worth of cocaine, but the dealer got it for let's say I don't know £250, if the runner comes back with £300, he is in debt because he should have made at least £150 in profit for the dealer and now the dealer is thinking he's getting high off his own supply and is a liability and will probably get his own back in some gruesome way. (Semi-structured interview 16)

Mosi, aged 24, explained how when he was at school and college, it was a common occurrence to hear of young people who went 'cunch' (drug dealing in new areas) without returning. When questioned further, he explained that the inference was that they:

[G]ot in trouble with the police or whatever, they were in a situation where they probably lost whatever they wanted to sell, you know? Like when you're doing this and if you don't do the job properly and you mess about then you get in trouble. Some people do go and don't come back, they might go, they might have messed about, you know anything can happen if you go, you gotta go there and do your stuff but you've gotta do it in the right way, you know you can't lose the stuff. There could be consequences, like *anything*. They might get in trouble with the police, or they might get beaten up if they lose the stuff or they might come back empty-handed, stressed, depressed, it can make people change you know, turn into something they weren't before. (Semi-structured interview 14)

Another area of anxiety lay in acquiring new customers. Kayson, one of the young women, described how her boyfriend had to 'look for addicts ("nitties") hanging around and told by his boss to actively seek out new customers' (semi-structured interview 13). In being assigned these tasks, young people must navigate challenging and risky terrains as well as manage relationships with drug addicts and vulnerable people, alongside the pressure of sales and the need to prove themselves within this illicit

market. Amida, aged 24, described how: 'It looks cool at first but it's still a demanding job that is on the clock all the time, 24 h a day. You'll always be thinking about it – a sale is a sale and money comes first' (semi-structured interview 17).

One final area of uncertainty came from the specific places where drug selling occurred. Kayson, aged 22, described how her ex-boyfriend was working as a runner and was attacked and robbed in a trap house (semi-structured interview 13). Jayden, now 25, described a similar incident: 'When I was younger, I knew of boys who went to cunch, and it was in the house and another gang *ran off* in the house with guns and stuff like that (semi-structured interview 21).

Akemi, aged 19 explained further:

... if they go out of town, they're living with drug addicts in crack houses, and there's class A drugs there. Users can try to rob them or maybe other out of town dealers might come to the area and they might rob them too. There's a lot of risk factors involved and on top of that the hours that they're working, long hours. There's hygiene as well, they won't be able to take a shower, they don't have the facilities to take showers out of town. (Semi-structured interview 19)

Hyper-realities and agency combine to develop a 'hyper-sense' of being, of hypervigilance, of rapid thought processes, of paranoid thinking and of 'watching your back'. This relates to the nature of drug selling, the risk involved, the hours worked, and the ambiguous hierarchies and mechanisms of control involved in 'shooting'. Nathanael, aged 21, explained:

You're so hypervigilant and shook all the time. You lose quality sleep and you're always on the ball and send all your messages on your trap phone as soon as you 're-up' [restock]. You'll always be wary and feel like you could be set up at any time, or danger is around the corner. Or the feds [police] are on your tail. Or there are operations going on around you. You'd have to be stingy with your trust. (Semi-structured interview 16)

Akemi, aged 19, agreed:

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 anything can happen at any time, so you've gotta be prepared for that.

To be begin with it's like yeah, I've got all this money in my hands, I'm meeting people that are like more vulnerable than me so I'm feeling really powerful but then after a while it like all catches up with you. Even if you're walking down the street, you're always looking over your shoulder. Sometimes I'm a bit scared for my life cos I don't know who's gonna be there. (Semi-structured interview 19)

In addition, paranoia is associated with the challenges of managing the nuances of drug dealing. As discussed, there are multiple issues that young people must manage and navigate: recruiting new customers, selling drugs, avoiding police prosecution, and so on. These issues lead to people feeling, as Amida, aged 24, described: 'Always on edge. Always ready to defend, fight, escape ... paranoid' (semi-structured interview 17). This

also relates to the reality of carrying drugs and associated consequences, as Mosi, aged 24, explained:

If you're carrying something you feel like who's behind me, who's after me? You're paranoid. If you're in an area where people are shooting and you're new in that area, people will be like why you in my area? That can then turn into a *situation*, you feel hyped. You're always looking over your shoulder. When you're carrying on the streets it's like 90% feeling like you're gonna get stopped. (Semi-structured interview 14)

Agency is 'hyper' and decision-making is deeply embedded within risk, with managing challenging and complex social terrains, with 'always watching your back', feeling the need to carry weapons for protection, taking drugs to minimise anxiety and 'thinking about potentially getting 'run up on and constantly aware of police or the authorities' (Jack, aged 21, semi-structured interview 15).

Young people navigate challenging terrains and ambiguous territories. They engage in strategic and tactical decision-making, often with little time to reflect on the risks involved or the implications for the future. Considering hyper-agency provides a way to deliberate the thoughts and actions that young people take to express power and autonomy, while also considering the bounded and restricted circumstances in which they do so. However, this is not to say that young people exist in a state of hyper-being at all times, in many instances, young people also face monotony, boredom and frustration. But hyper-agency should be considered as part of the myriad of ways in which young people exert agency and engage in county lines.

## Conclusion

At any time, young people are affected by 'multiple relations, spaces, times, structures, and emotions with varying outcomes and potential (albeit constrained) agentic choices' (Dankyi et al., 2022: 6). The research demonstrates the importance of remaining critical of extant discourse that aligns county lines with a 'predator–victim dynamic'. This research (and that of others, i.e. Windle et al., 2020) demonstrates that coercion is more complex and nuanced. It relates to wider structural issues, resulting from neoliberalism, inequality and marginalisation, that makes drug selling an alluring prospect that may provide a 'way out', social mobility and inclusion. This is especially true for some of the UK's most vulnerable young people for whom other viable options of earning and income and social inclusion are unavailable.

The article questions how we might better understand young people's agency in drug selling in the UK, but also around the world. This aligns with existing discourse that challenges the dominance of western theory in criminological knowledge (Carrington et al., 2016). By utilising theory largely developed in the Global South, a more expansive understanding of county lines in the UK has been explored. This points to the need to decolonise disciplines, to address bias in academia that prioritises knowledge from the 'metropole' (Mignolo and Walsh, 2011) and the ways in which approaching issues such as county lines from a global perspective can help to expand knowledge and awareness of this significant and concerning issue.

Furthermore, how can we develop our understanding of agency so that we can better equip ourselves to help tackle and prevent county lines? Any meaningful interaction with young people engaged in county lines should engage with an understanding of agency as multi-faceted, ambiguous and 'hyper'. It should also recognise the challenges faced by young people exerting hyper-agency, its effects on their decision-making, well-being and their mental health. Yet, there is a lacuna between studies of childhood and criminology, specifically regarding decision-making in criminal activities. Far more needs to be done to address these gaps and move towards a multidisciplinary understanding of agency and crime. How then might we develop a more expansive theoretical but also practical framework of agency that will support the young people that need it most? In light of this, more research to explore these issues, alongside other components of the research (e.g. coercion and labour as a lens through which to consider juvenile offending), is both timely and necessary and will help to develop a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of county lines today.

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### Notes

1. The name of the organisation is intentionally excluded from this publication to protect the anonymity of the participants.
2. All names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants.

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## Author biography

**Sally Atkinson-Sheppard** was awarded her PhD from King's College London after completing an ethnographic study into street children's involvement in organised crime in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Sally began her career as a researcher for the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) in London, where she worked with young offenders engaged in violent offending, developed the MPS first Gangs Manual and represented the MPS in a collaborative study with the British Prison Service which explored the psychology of gang related violence. Sally went on to advise on a variety of criminal justice reform projects in Bangladesh, including leading the Bangladesh Prison Directorate and the Bangladesh Anti-Corruption Commission through the development of their first strategic plans. She then lived in Beijing for 3 years where she led a study into migrant children's involvement in gangs and organised crime in China. Sally now works as a senior lecturer in Criminology at the University of Westminster. Her first book: *The Gangs of Bangladesh; Mastaans, Street Gangs and 'Illicit Child Labourers'* in Dhaka. Palgrave Macmillan was awarded the Asian Society of Criminology distinguished book award in 2020. Sally's current research focuses on county lines in the UK, specifically coercion, control and young people's agency. She is involved in studies which consider street children's relationship with play and the UNCRC and gang member

life histories. Sally's research also develops comparative analysis of street children's involvement in gangs and organised crime in Asia (notably Bangladesh, China and Nepal) and, in collaboration with colleagues in Nepal, the first study into street children's involvement in gangs and organised crime in Kathmandu. She is writing her second book, 'Through the lens of labour: developing pan-Asia understandings of young people's involvement in gangs and organised crime'. The book will propose and develop a new theoretical framework for considering juvenile offending 'through the lens of labour'.