

Researchers investigate effect of COVID-19 on UK organized crime

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The effects of COVID-19 on Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) are being investigated by the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham, UK.

The research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to COVID-19, will assess what impact the measures introduced to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have had on perpetrator behavior, such as how it has changed

or continued, and will inform efforts to urgently safeguard [vulnerable children](#) and adults during the pandemic.

EUROPOL, the National Crime Agency and regional police have previously speculated that changing supply-demand dynamics may disrupt drug supply channels, and shortages could increase drug-related violence between gangs, suppliers and distributors. Lockdown restrictions are also likely to have impacted point-of-sale tactics, with resulting shifts towards online and dark-web markets.

The Rights Lab hopes to shed light on COVID-19's impact on the distribution and sale of illegal drugs and CCE through 'county lines', where drugs are transported from one area to another, often across police and local authority boundaries, usually by children or vulnerable people who are coerced and controlled by gangs.

Through anonymised national crime, intelligence and case records, as well as interviews, the project will detail COVID's effect on 'county lines' operations, and the prevention, detection and safeguarding abilities of police and other organizations. The Rights Lab is working with national law enforcement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the Victims' Commissioner and partners connected with the Nottinghamshire anti-slavery partnership, including Nottinghamshire Police.

The researchers are exploring changes in offending related to potential shifts to online grooming and internet misuse; changes to illegal drug markets generally; and possible increased risk of vulnerable people's properties to cuckooing—where drug dealers take over someone's home in order to use it as a base for county lines [drug](#) trafficking—as offenders seek to continue operations with discretion.

Other areas under scrutiny include the impact of social distancing

measures on already vulnerable children due to the reduced opportunities for in person safeguarding and social care.

The research will provide police, safeguarding and care organizations with evidence that will guide intervention measures to address 'county lines'-related offending, and reduce risk to vulnerable children and adults.

Dr. Ben Brewster, project lead and Research Fellow in the Rights Lab and the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Nottingham, said: "This study will be the first of its kind, offering insights on the rapid reorganization of UK organized crime as a result of short-term macro socio-economic shifts and their subsequent impact on the safeguarding environment. It will provide a sound basis for urgent action on Child Criminal Exploitation through enforcement or safeguarding responses and policy changes."

Provided by University of Nottingham

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