

# **Drug Gang Activity and Policing Responses in an English Seaside Town: ‘County Lines’, ‘Cuckooing’ and Community Impacts<sup>1</sup>**

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While there have been many studies examining gangs involved in the distribution of illegal drugs in cities, relatively few have examined the nature of gang trends in small towns. In England gangs have been expanding into new territories outside major cities, but the academic literature has been slow to report this noteworthy development. In the study of drug gang activity in a small coastal town of Clacton in Essex, interviewing of local residents and analysing crime statistics were conducted, which was followed-up periodically over the ensuing 18 months. Results identified crimes that can be attributed to gang activity, the kind of individuals involved in those crimes, why gangs are targeting Clacton and similar towns, and what police and community responses have been – and could be in the future. Ultimately, the data highlighted how drug gangs in Clacton appear to represent a hybrid between traditional street gangs and organised crime groups.

**Keywords:** gangs, drugs, violence, ‘county lines’, ‘cuckooing’, police operations

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## **1 Introduction**

The street-level supply of heroin and crack cocaine in England is changing. In many local retail markets for illegal drugs (as for example defined in the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act, see UK Government, 1971),<sup>4</sup> dealers have become more mobile (Coomber & Moyle, 2017). Drug gangs have become more proactively entrepreneurial in looking for new opportunities and alternatives to working in cities where they face over-heated competition between gangs as well as enhanced attention from police (Andell & Pitts, 2018). New peripatetic strategies have evolved and been pursued. These can involve travelling to and from out-of-town locations, setting up short-term bases, or occasionally a semi-permanent move by some personnel to a new location – and heavy use of mobile phone capabilities. This is a contrast to

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<sup>4</sup> Although alcohol and psychoactive ‘legal high’ drugs pose problems of some concern in this location and similar communities, this paper and research are only concerned with illicit / illegal drugs as defined under the UK Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and subsequent amendments (UK Government, 1971).

previously dominant models and understandings of markets supplying illegal drugs, which assumed local customers were largely being served by local dealers (Dorn, Murji, & South, 1992; Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007).

## **2 The Study Location**

Clacton-on-Sea is a small coastal town in northeast Essex, with a population of around 52,000; it is part of Tendring District, which has a population of around 139,000. The decline of the seasonal tourism trade, alongside other symptoms of economic downturns in the 1980s and 1990s, meant an increase in holiday accommodation being converted to welfare hostels and rented 'bed-sits'. Similar dynamics in other seaside towns have been linked to deprivation and crime, and a report from the British Hospitality Association (2016: 1) noted the following: 'Statistically, people living on the coast are more likely to be poorly educated, unemployed and living in low-quality housing than those living in similar inland communities'. In Tendring the employment prospects for young people have not been good, and statistics indicate that 1-in-7 people live in a deprived area, and 1-in-5 children live in poverty (Tendring District Council, 2018). The town includes Jaywick, the most deprived ward in the UK (ONS, 2015). In 2018, data released by the Office for National Statistics showed that 'Seaside towns and resorts account for more than half of the hotspots for deaths from heroin and morphine misuse as deprivation and crime gangs take their toll on coastal centres' (Milmo, 2018).

From around 2014, Clacton began to feature in local and then some national news reports concerning the visibility of drug dealing operations and transactions. The related social and health harms, criminality and community anxiety prompted an increase in police response. The local police District Commander, Chief Inspector Russ Cole, summarised the problem as one of incursion by organised criminal gangs from London and, subsequently, from Liverpool and Manchester, whose members were travelling to the area to distribute Class A drugs, primarily crack cocaine and heroin (Cole, 2015). Clacton was not unique, however; similar developments were being observed and described in other coastal areas around the same period (Coomber & Moyle, 2017).

This study charts the developing activity and market in Clacton and describes the particular crimes of concern to the local police and community that can be linked to the presence of gangs. The backgrounds of offenders and victims are documented, and some of the reasons why Clacton became a particular focus for gang activity are noted. The character of police and local community responses are likewise described.

## **3 Defining Terms**

### **3.1 Gangs**

Pitts (2008) has argued that gangs are structured and can exert coercive power to draw young people into roles as 'reluctant gangsters', while Hallsworth (2011) suggests that 'gangs' exist but in softer, more flexible forms, and that perceptions of gang violence are more a product of a media-driven moral panic

and the activities of the community and control 'industry' dedicated to 'tackling' gangs than actually related to the nature of 'the gang' itself (Hallsworth, 2011).

One definition that has been adopted in UK government policy papers (although police forces have used slightly varied versions) is that a gang may be properly understood as: "A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who (a) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group, (b) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence, (c) identify with or lay claim over territory, (d) have some form of identifying structural feature, and (e) are in conflict with other, similar, gangs" (Antrobus, 2009: 3; see also Hallsworth & Young, 2006; Pitts, 2008).

Whatever the appropriate definition of gangs, or resolution of questions about the degree to which they are 'organised', something significant has been happening in the area of gang activity in the past ten years. Developments identified in different drug markets around the U.K. have reflected the influence of new forms of *real* and *virtual* communication, and of market links between different localities, facilitated by two major tactics known as 'county lines' and 'cuckooing' (National Crime Agency [NCA], 2015).

### **3.2 County Lines**

The National Crime Agency (NCA) (2015: 2) has described 'county lines' as operations where "an individual, or more frequently a group, establishes and operates a telephone number in an area outside of their normal locality in order to sell drugs directly to users at street level". Such a group would usually originate within an urban area and cross one or more police boundaries into rural areas, primarily to distribute heroin and crack cocaine, although smaller quantities of cocaine, amphetamines and cannabis may be involved. In one recent case in the study area a dealer had taken care to not be driving in possession of heroin or crack, but had either forgotten about or regarded as inconsequential a quantity of cannabis placed in the roof lining of the car.

The main reason for the choice of a location is the perception that it can be developed as a market space, with existing and potential customers and the likelihood of little resistance from local dealers. The NCA (2015) notes that coastal towns with declining economies often provide suitable markets with various factors contributing to this, e.g. possibly the removal of a different county line (group) leaving a gap in the market; family and community links that make entry to the area easier; high availability of cheap rental accommodation in converted hotels makes them attractive for prisoners on release; housing re-allocations from urban areas with chronic home shortages. NCA (2015) data suggest gangs either target small coastal towns with high unemployment and deprivation, or affluent areas with good transportation links to the metropolitan London area.

Clacton suffers from multiple forms of deprivation, but it enjoys good rail and road links to London and Eastern England. Trains are the preferred mode of transport for running a county line as young 'runners' are unlikely to be stopped, although gangs may also hire cars, using the identities of local users to avoid detection. The NCA (2015) report suggests that gang members use debt as a way of recruiting local

young people, who may be groomed initially with money or clothing but then are told they owe the group money so that they must work for the county line<sup>5</sup>. Such young people may be vulnerable and known to Social or Youth Offending Services, although those *not* known to the authorities may be seen by gangs as having the advantage of being ‘below the radar’. According to the NCA (2015), whoever is targeted will suffer negative impacts on their education, and on their physical and mental health.

The county line is “the lifeblood of the group’s activity” (NCA, 2015: 4), representing a brand and not an individual person, remaining a fairly stable enterprise that can run for years as a closely guarded asset that can generate daily profits of up to £3,000.

### **3.3 Cuckooing**

The NCA (2015) report describes cuckooing as a way in which gang members exploit local drug users by paying them with drugs, or by encouraging them to build up a drug debt in order to exploit this and live temporarily in their premises. Coomber and Moyle (2012, 2017) described cuckooing in their studies of drugs markets in Southend (south of Clacton, along the same coastline and similarly easily accessible from London) and elsewhere, with cases of drug dealers staying in one place for a few days then changing residence to avoid detection. Often gang member dealers engage in using a cuckooed residence to store drugs, returning only to replenish their stock and finding overnight accommodation in a different location.

## **4 Methodology**

Different methodological approaches have been employed in recent studies of drug markets. Long-term observational studies (Harding, 2014; Pitts, 2008) provide a detailed insight into gang life and membership over a period, while rapid appraisal approaches are appropriate to time-limited projects (Coomber & Moyle, 2012). This latter approach gathers information quickly to provide a picture of a problem or situation at a particular moment in time. It can be both descriptive and analytical, and useful in providing a basis “for making assessment[s] regarding agency intervention” (Coomber & Moyle, 2012: 9). This paper draws on a rapid appraisal study using a mixed methods and triangulation approach (analysis of quantitative data and qualitative interviews and focus groups) (Coomber & Moyle, 2012) that has subsequently been revisited to provide a broad understanding across time.

### **4.1 Data Collection**

The initial rapid appraisal was carried out by the first author and facilitated by the local police District Commander who acted as gatekeeper to other officers and to a local social worker who provided introductions to a former gang member and a former drug addict who had been the victim of gang intimidation. Interviews were in-depth and semi-structured; five interviews with six participants were

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<sup>5</sup> Manipulation of ‘debt’ as leverage is not new (see e.g. Thompson, 2000).

carried out and analysed using Nvivo v.11. Subsequent informal updating was carried out by the second author drawing on (a) meetings with other police officers, local drug agency workers, and researchers conducting a similar project in a nearby town; (b) the careful monitoring of local press; and, (c) drawing upon findings from a student ‘policy and practice project’ on ‘Operation Raptor’,<sup>6</sup> the police operation targeting drug gang activities in Essex. Quantitative data was primarily sourced from police crime statistics, with some additional data from police reports provided.<sup>7</sup>

## 4.2 Ethics and Anonymisation

Ethical approval was granted following University of Essex protocols and Essex Police also considered ethical and confidentiality issues. It is also worth noting that for a study such as this the question of anonymisation of *location* also arises. As with other studies of ‘gangs’ we anonymise participants to protect their safety and identity. However, Aldridge, Medina & Ralphs (2008), propose also anonymising the name of the place of study to reduce (a) social stigma; and (b) the risk of strengthening a gang identity, ‘brand name’ and reputation. Others argue that analysis of gangs requires “understanding of local dynamics and the interactions of actors. Without such context, the history or habitus cannot be fully explored, assessed or elucidated” (Harding, 2014: 13). We agree with Harding that some description of local character is important to provide context and, in our case, once mention is made of ‘a seaside town’ in north-east Essex, Clacton becomes easily identifiable. Furthermore, the enhancement of gang identity and brand is far more likely to have followed from extensive regional and national media reporting<sup>8</sup> than an academic account. It is also worth pointing out that the police often aim to work closely with media in order to highlight their activities, note successes and ‘send messages’ to the community and criminals.

## 5 Results

An unsurprising theme in interview narratives in this and similar studies is ‘how the area has changed’ from that of a favoured locale. Several participants described Clacton before the gang problem as a quiet seaside town, known as a preferred retirement location. This is not to say that drugs were not available then. Ben (Community Support worker) explained: “Traditionally... local users... would...pool resources together to buy their heroin [etc.]... and that's how it used to be. More like a community kind of spirit! There wasn't the levels of violence ... that's going on [now]. Then these guys started to come in and undercut the local guys.”

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<sup>7</sup> See data available at: <http://www.essex.pcc.police.uk/scrutiny/essex-police-performance/>

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, national TV documentaries such as ‘Ross Kemp’s Extreme Worlds’, Sky 1 in early 2015, regular reports in north Essex newspapers (Evening Gazette; East Anglian Daily Times), and BBC national news pages: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-esssex-42453805>.

In the 2010s, the authorities noticed a significant increase in the number of robberies, from two or three per month to between thirty and forty. According to the senior police officer, around 2014 the investigation of a series of knifepoint robberies found that those persons responsible were a group of (approximately) twelve individuals from London, staying in Clacton on a temporary basis in caravans. Essex Police launched a successful operation and arrested those involved. However, although the robberies stopped, the local crime dynamic had changed thereafter.

### **5.1 Crimes being Committed**

From 2014, Tendring's rates of robbery and 'theft other' decreased by 20% and 32%, respectively, but acts of 'theft from the person' rose by 66.7% and 'violence against the person' increased by 22%. Within this category, 'violence with injury' increased by 12.3%, 'violence without injury' increased by 29.6%. In 2014-15 there was one homicide, but three took place between April 2015 and March 2016. From 2016 into 2017, crime figures suggest some increase in violence but no homicides. Interestingly, from 2014, one result of police adoption of a strategy focusing on *serious drug dealers* rather than *users in possession for personal use* was a decline in drug offences. This police strategy was a thoughtful one representing a pragmatic combination of both harm reduction and resource maximisation approaches. The senior officer appropriately aimed to avoid criminalising young people seen as associating with the wrong peer-group, potentially pushing them into a criminal lifestyle. This strategy aimed to make use of limited staff time to target serious criminals.

Police intelligence officers have suggested drug users will commit a variety of crimes to obtain money, ranging from prostitution to theft: "I think class A drug users are committing all the volume crime across the spectrum. There's not one crime they wouldn't commit". However, it seems acts of violence are more likely to be committed by gang members, as discussed below.

### **5.2 Drugs**

Varieties of recreational drugs such as cannabis and amphetamine have been available locally for many years. The significant change to the market has followed the increased availability of drugs categorised as Class A (under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971), predominantly crack cocaine and heroin (UK Government, 1971). Police officers remarked that twenty years ago it would be considered a noteworthy "victory" to arrest someone with "ten to twenty wraps" of Class A drugs on them, but recently it has not been uncommon to arrest someone carrying between two to three hundred. Typically, one wrap contains between .1 and .2 of a gram. The street market value for a single wrap is £10, but they are often sold as a 'buy 3 for £25' deal. Purity levels range between 20% and 80%, averaging at about 50%.

### **5.3 Theft**

Drug addiction and serious drug misuse are frequently associated with acquisitive crime as a means of obtaining funds to buy drugs (Bryan, Del Bono, & Purdney, 2013; Pierce et al., 2015). Two intelligence

officers described the local situation as follows: David: "...an awfully large percentage of acquisitive crime is related to funding drugs. Shop-lifting is massive... whether it be meat or perfume or anything that they can sell really." Charlie: "It's daily really. I think the average... needs about £100 a day to spend on gear, which is a lot of money... And the only way they can do that is to beg, borrow, or steal which is what they do."

#### **5.4 Sexual offences**

Although sexual offences accounted for only 2.8% of all crime in Tendring in 2015/16, this figure had increased 11% over the previous year. Respondents could not absolutely link sexual offences to gang activity, however the senior officer claimed there was evidence of an increase in young girls involved in a semi-organised form of sex trafficking (see also Heart Programme, 2013; Trickett, 2016): "Recently there was a Romanian lady nicked for shoplifting. We gave her a caution and let her go. A week later that same Romanian lady had spoken to a detective, having gone missing, and reported that actually she was being exploited, someone had taken her passport, given her no money, living in a caravan, being forced into and getting involved in all sorts of nasty sexual things."

#### **5.5 Violence**

After theft, the next largest category of crime has been violence against the person. Between 2015 and 2016, there were an *additional* 566 cases of violence against the person in Tendring reported to the police, an increase of 22.2%. Respondents suggested this violence is predominantly inter-gang related, arising when a new gang seeks to establish their presence, or two or more gangs are in conflict over customers, or when drug 'runners' are robbed by a rival gang and retaliation follows. This can escalate to kidnappings and even physical torture, as the senior officer explained: "It's no secret that we've had people as young as 19 kidnapping other gang members, putting them in the boot of a car. We've got incidents, including with a guy... detained for a period in his flat, held down and a steam iron was placed on his chest -- he later came to us."

Escalation in violence was explained by several factors. First, gangs from Liverpool and Manchester had arrived in Clacton in February 2016 and the levels of violence rose immediately. Violence with injury rose by 12%, and violence without injury rose by 30%. Interviewees – police and others -- believe these gangs were instructed to arrive in the town and to make their presence known to the London gangs through a show of violence. Secondly, participants suggested that as there are so many different gangs, violence was bound to escalate as gangs sought to gain prominence and establish their reputation. Lastly, an escalation in violence could also be attributed to an increase in possession and use of dangerous weapons. Tendring saw detected possession of weapons -- usually knives -- rise by 15% in 2016. One ex-drug user familiar with the gangs expected this to be part of a process of 'evolution': "Once it's fists and then the people with the knives outdo the people with the fists, and now the people with the guns

outdo the people with the knives, and that's basically how it goes, isn't it? So yeh... that'll probably escalate... and it'll be every side has got guns.”

## **5.6 Cuckooing**

Cuckooing technically is not a crime, but the purpose of ‘cuckooing’ is almost always to provide a base for illegal activities. Addresses and victims are carefully selected by gang members who assess what such a base could offer (e.g., proximity to the town centre, nearby alleyways, the absence of CCTV, etc.). Gangs typically target individuals considered to be vulnerable, perhaps because they are young, old, have mental health issues, are unemployed, or have children they are struggling to care for and feed and clothe. Based on experience, ex-user Frank explained dealers often phone local drug users until they find someone who is feeling very unwell and desperate for their next hit. They then offer free drugs in return for use of the property. Even if the user attempts to be assertive and impose conditions on the arrangement, for example requesting that only one person uses their property, four or five may nonetheless arrive. Frank describes how being cuckooed once can be the start of a cycle: “And then because I've said yes to this one person, this person has given them my number, ... then all these other people... come down.... You always seem to get the call when you're not well... and then... you haven't said no straight away, they can offer you maybe another one [free drugs] and then, alright then, ... I'll do it. Then, of course, they come round and they give you your bits and then you're screwed again for the next few days ... ‘cos each day that they're around, you wake up in the morning and there'll be a couple of shots in front of me, and that's basically started the whole day off again...”

Cuckooing not only impacts the person living in that property, it can also have an adverse effect on neighbouring residents and properties; as a local social worker described: “one person that I'm working with ... is in recovery from crack cocaine addiction... She is also, or was also, a sex worker. And these guys cuckooed the property next door. They knew that she was a user, and so they would, as soon as they saw a punter leave, [they would] go there, take the £70 that she'd just made, and give her the crack cocaine in exchange. This was happening 5, 6, 7 times a day. So, of course, her level of dependency was absolutely massive.”

It is uncertain whether violence is routinely used within cuckooed addresses, with police intelligence officers suggesting this was likely the case because violence would draw attention to what the gang were doing as well as discouraging people from working for them. Furthermore, gangs using cuckooed addresses have often been invited, even if reluctantly, in exchange for free drugs: “...quite often they're not always necessarily over the moon that they're there, but they're getting their drugs for free” (David) However, ex-user Frank, a victim of cuckooing himself, claimed this was not the case and that cuckooing is centred on violence, threats and intimidation: “I mean, when these five blokes walked into my house, one of them had a great big carving knife, he's waving it around. I'm thinking, oh my God, what have I got myself into?”



And in another case: “I mean I knew this girl, ... she was doing it for them, and she was short on the money or something, or she had done extra, and they threw her little kid out of the top window and he broke his leg and his arm, all because of she was either short on the money or she'd done extra drugs.” When asked how common such acts of violence might be, Frank responded: “A lot of violence goes on. I've heard of stories where people have either done too much or not given them their right money and then they've kicked the crap out of them, or stabbed them, or whatever, because they've taken the piss. And these people that have done this to them, they carry on working for them [the gang]. Because they need the drugs”

### **5.7 County Lines**

‘County line’ is the term used by police and local authorities to describe the process of drugs being brought through different counties for distribution although ‘the line’ *itself* is a mobile phone number and phone memory with the contact numbers of local drug users. This information represents a substantial customer market and, as such, is worth a large amount of money (estimated to be around £3000 per day). Consequently, gangs will fiercely protect a county line, as the senior officer explains: “they defend those mobile telephones to the hilt. If a gang member... loses that phone they'll be held to [account] ...”

Lines can also be sold if a gang needs to relocate their business, perhaps for up to £25,000. As a result, the operators of the line can change although ‘the line’ itself remains the same. Police officers Charlie and David described a line they attempted to remove from the local market: David: “...we used to have a line, 'T-kid', which took about five years to identify, didn't it? But that phone number went through so many different hands”; Charlie: “It was operating in Clacton for eight years, this county line. Different people on the end of the line, the same customer base. Everyone refers to it as ‘T’, so you can't identify who's got the phone at that time.”

Furthermore, there is a blurring between the ‘county line’ and ‘the gang’ responsible for running it. Charlie explains: “The name of the county line will be completely different from the gang they're from in London. We've ... had a county line running and we've stopped one lad who we believe is working for that line, and he may be affiliated to a certain gang from Newham. Then stop another lad who's working for the same county line [but] who is affiliated to a different gang in Newham. So the further they get away from the Met [London], the [more the] gang lines become a bit blurred and they could work for each other on a county line, but be different gangs down in Met [London].”

In the past few years Clacton has had up to fifteen county lines, although not all would be ‘live’ and some are better known and positioned in the market than others.

### **5.8 Gangs**

Gang competition and conflicts elsewhere have been linked to territory or 'postcode wars', or to attacks because a gang member is wearing the wrong gang colours. However, gangs in Clacton seem to be principally motivated by profit derived from the sale of Class A drugs.

Some London-based gangs are well-known (the Jay Boys, Custom House, the Pembury Boys), others less so. More recently, northern-based gangs from Liverpool and Manchester have established a presence, bringing with them a higher level of violence: "I think historically the use of firearms is quite prevalent in Manchester and Liverpool, and whether it's just simply because they're used to it, or whether ... they get sent out by the top boys 'go and make a mark, let everyone know you're not to be messed with' - we just don't know."

Although there are no established home-grown Clacton gangs, local criminals can have a role working *for* gangs as street runners or holding drugs or money for them. Some local criminals have been displaced: "from Clacton town centre into perhaps less lucrative areas of criminal enterprise around drugs, around growing and cultivating cannabis."

The structure of the gangs was described as "fluid and interchangeable" at lower levels, with Emma (a former gang member) describing street dealers and runners as "disposables" who are easily replaced. David (police intelligence officer) agreed: "they utilise vulnerable people ... a user one day will be a dealer the next because they'll tip them at their address ... they'll get paid a couple of shots or whatever. They're the 'dealer for the day'. But they're not a dealer, they're just a basic level user"

### **5.9 Women**

The role of women and girls as reported in this study was primarily to transport or deliver drugs and avoid police attention. For example, cars driven by women are less likely to be stopped by police: "...girls in the back singing along. Police ain't interested. They're interested in the boy racers doing 100 down the motorway. So if you're sitting at 60 on the inside lane, yeh, not a problem"... "You're a girl and you've got your baby in the car and coppers don't think that. The first thing when you pull over a woman, you're not going to sit there and think 'you've got 10kg in the boot.'" (Emma)

### **5.10 Ethnic Background**

Gang members from London are generally young black men, some of whom are second or third-generation Somalian or Afro-Caribbean (see also Coomber & Moyle, 2017) who then recruit local street dealers who are typically white. Police intelligence officers identified one London-based county line made up of young white men from an area of London, and gang members from Liverpool and Manchester are generally white.

## **6 Reasons why this Location has Experienced these Developments**

London may be close to 'saturation' in terms of territory and activities for gangs. The senior officer observed that police intelligence suggested London has: "around 250 recognised gangs, just under 5,000

people involved... around 20 boroughs really suffer from a gang problem.” Growth in competition between gangs as well as financial factors have combined to encourage a form of entrepreneurial mobility. One senior officer remarked that due to “changes in [welfare] benefits, gentrification [pushing up rents]... your money doesn't go as far in London”. Various services in other parts of the country with housing shortages have also been known to encourage vulnerable people to relocate to Tendring, advising them that housing is more easily available there. Many of these individuals have drug and/or alcohol dependency issues, resulting in a large population of Class A drug users living in a small town with few socio-economic opportunities available but a “ready market” (David) for the gangs.

This existing market is probably the most important factor behind the presence of drug gangs, with an unsatisfied demand for Class A drugs: “a huge market of heroin and crack cocaine. I mean, these people aren't stupid. They know where the markets are, they know where the best place to be is, so they'll set up shop” (Charlie). A social worker noted similarities between Clacton and other places with a gang problem: “When you look at places like Swindon, Stoke, other places that have had this cuckoo-county lines sort of stuff .... These are all places that have similar socio-economic issues and that's what I believe is key to this.”

## **7 Changes to Policy and Practice: Suggestions from Respondents**

### **7.1 Regulate/Legalise Drugs**

Both police and ex-users suggested regulating drugs would be the most effective approach: “Prohibition never works. All you do is create this black market... if we can give these addicts free, clean heroin, then it'll stop these people being able to operate, surely” (Charlie)

Legalising all drugs was another option: “As long as the market is there, there has to be someone that supplies it. The only way to get rid of it is to legalise it. ... If there's no market, they can't sell it” (Charlie) However, Frank, a former addict, did not support legalisation. He suggested regulating supply in the same way that methadone is currently regulated via a doctor's prescription, and he believes this would drastically reduce crime rates: “Why would you go to a dealer, you're getting it free from your doctor? That would wipe out burglaries, that would wipe out theft [...] That'll cut off the dealers, cut off all the crime ... But politicians ...can't be seen to be legalising drugs.”

### **7.2 Enhance Policing**

One argument would be that an increased police presence in Clacton would create a more hostile environment for the gangs and help to push them out. This is largely based on having more police officers on patrol. Success, in policing terms, would be to remove a county line and ensure any vulnerable people involved are safeguarded. However, removing *one* county line is unlikely to prevent another gang filling that space: “This issue we have is... they're supplying lines to fill this big basket... As long as that basket is there, another line will always come in because the word will go out - 'oh, they're short' (David)

### **7.3 Improve Social Services**

The social support available for those with addictions or who are serious misusers could be improved, but it is recognised these services are expensive and politically unpopular, particularly at a time when local government spending is suffering cutbacks and ‘austerity budgets’ are the norm.

### **7.4 Educate about Drugs and Gangs**

Better education about drugs and gangs could be used to inform young people about the consequences of involvement in gang activity: “If we teach them in the schools about not doing this – (for example) we’ll get an 18 year-old lad, arguably sent here against his will, with a pocket full of gear, we’re nicking them, and then suddenly they’re criminalised ..., and their chances from there are very bleak” (David). Despite identifying these possibilities for future preventative and deterrent actions, there were some expressions of doubt as to how successful these might be: “At the end of the day you could throw money at it forever more, and it would take the money and take the money and take the money. But it will still exist.” (David)

## **8 Discussion**

In London boroughs that have previously been the base for these gangs, territorial preservation and friction has led to violence, including the use of knives and even guns, making locations with less competition look more attractive. At the same time, anti-gang operations run by the Metropolitan police have intensified (see e.g. Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime, 2014) increasing the attraction of finding new locations for illicit drug businesses. These factors have had an encouragement or ‘push’ effect away from London that has coincided with other economic pressures. In the Clacton area, several county lines are now operating, run by drug gangs from London, Manchester and Liverpool. Violence, theft and volume crime have increased, and a business model operates in which gangs target vulnerable addicts, employ threats, violence and intimidation, and cuckoo homes to use as a base for selling drugs. Gang members visibly operating in Clacton typically appear to be young men in low level positions, although roles for females may be more prevalent than authorities realize (NCA, 2015). According to the NCA (2015), children or young people (usually males around 14-17) may be recruited from a gangs’ home territory or the new local market as ‘runners’ to deliver or look after drugs or money, and sometimes also sell drugs. Young entrants to the business are attractive as disposable employees or possible apprentices to train because they cost little, can be controlled, present themselves in ways not arousing police attention, and can be recruited from the new location or the area, from which the gang originates.

Motivation for involvement in the business is predominantly financial, with ‘easy money’ being attractive to those feeling excluded from the prizes of a consumer economy (Hall, Winslow, & Ancrum, 2008). Illustratively, a receptionist at a local caravan park could receive £1 commission for each booking

she secured or earn £500 in one day by working for a gang. Previous studies (Collison, 1996; South, 2004) have noted the links between consumerism, hedonism and the profitability of participation in the drug economy, and these same links are echoed here. As David reports: “I used to speak to the young dealers in [London and] say... ‘you're nice lads, why do you do it?’ and they said ‘we want nice things, we want jewellery, we want watches, we want nice cars, we want money, we want girls’, so there's another part of that ...”

Emma (former gang member) noted the influence of social media on aspirations and desires: “I think it’s Facebook, it has a lot to do with it. Instagram and Twitter and Snapchat. Because everyone wants one of these phones and a lot of Mums and Dads, especially in Clacton, can't afford one of these phones. So how'd you get one? They all want their £150 trainers.”

The main ‘victims’ of gang activity are those who are involved in the drug economy, including rival gang members, runners, and addicts (average ‘law-abiding citizens’ are unlikely to be directly affected although fear of crime and negative reputational and economic impacts mean many local people suffer in some way). Factors influencing the gangs moving into Clacton included the high demand for Class A drugs which can, in turn, be linked to the re-location to Clacton of vulnerable individuals (many with existing drug problems) and to high levels of deprivation. London gangs may also be seeking to avoid inter-gang violence. Some gang members are mobile in the sense of moving back and forth between home territory and Clacton, although some do take up more fixed residency there. Police and social and community services have responded by seeking to build local partnerships, cooperation with other police forces, and provision of social support for victims (Dwan, 2015, 2018a).

The gangs in Clacton could be categorised as existing somewhere between conventional street gangs and organised crime groups. Their activity is rational (it is rational to supply demand), organised (recruiting runners who are less likely to be caught by police -- i.e., young people), and strategic (to avoid escalating inter-gang violence). However, they are not seeking to consolidate their power in the way traditional organised crime groups might. They are visible, often known to the police, and operate at the street level where organised criminals tend not to operate. Gang activity in Clacton sits in a grey area, not *just* street gangs, and not *quite* organised crime groups.

## **9 Conclusion**

Police responses to local drug gang activity in North Essex have been operating in new operational and strategic structures since 2014 with the launch of Operation Raptor to gather intelligence and target key offenders working on ‘county lines’. During 2017 police made 668 arrests of people suspected of involvement, seized £346,820 in cash, drugs with a street value of £684,530, and 149 weapons (Nugent, 2018). High profile court cases involved prosecution of the Jay Boys Gang from North and East London, and the ‘Frankie’ drug supply network (Dwan, 2018b) which were reported as making profits of £2,000-£3,000 per day and recruiting drivers by Facebook (Nugent, 2017). In the same period, for 2015-16, national official statistics recorded an increase in drug-related deaths, some attributed to ‘legal highs’

and synthetic opioids (e.g., fentanyl), but with heroin continuing to ‘exert a toxic grip on the so-called “Trainspotting Generation”’ (Milmo, 2018) of somewhat older users aged between 40 and 49.

In this context, although some police officers ‘on the ground’ are expressing interest in proposals to decriminalise or legalise a drug supply, the policy position of Government remains fixed. In April 2018, launching the new UK strategy to combat serious violence, the Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, explicitly referred to County Lines drug distribution as a driver of violence and noted the need for tougher anti-drugs laws (Snead, 2018). In Clacton, the new senior officer for the District has said there will be more use of ‘stop and search’ to try to detect drugs and weapons, and more calls on the public and partners to provide information and support to the local police. This may be unsurprising, but it sounds like the continuation of police approaches that have been in place for a long time. Meanwhile, gangs appear to be evolving, hybridising and innovating as they shape their markets in response to heightened police attention.

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## **Dejavnosti prekupčevalskih kriminalnih združb z drogo in odzivi policije v angleškem obmorskem mestu: 'območje grofije', 'podtaknjenost' in vpliv na skupnost**

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Številne študije so se osredotočale na tolpe in njihovo vlogo v distribuciji prepovedanih drog v velikih mestih, vendar se jih je relativno malo osredotočalo na značilnosti kriminalnih združb v majhnih mestih. Kljub temu, da so se v Angliji kriminalne združbe razširile na nova območja zunaj večjih mest, znanstvena literatura počasi sledi njihovem razvoju in preučevanju tovrstnega dogajanja. V študiji o dejavnostih kriminalne združbe, ki prekupčuje z drogo v majhnem obmorskem mestu Clacton v Essexu, sta bila izvedena anketiranje lokalnega prebivalstva in analiza statističnih podatkov o kriminaliteti, s periodičnim spremljanjem v naslednjih 18 mesecih. Ugotovitve študije so izpostavile kazniva dejanja, ki jih je mogoče pripisati dejavnostim kriminalne združbe, značilnosti vpletenih posameznikov, vzrokov za izbor Clactona in podobnih majhnih mest za njihovo kriminalno dejavnost ter kakšni so bili in kakšni so možni odzivi policije in skupnosti. Rezultati so pokazali, da kriminalne združbe, ki prekupčujejo z drogo v Clactonu, predstavljajo hibrid med tradicionalnimi uličnimi tolpami in organiziranimi kriminalnimi skupinami.

**Ključne besede:** tolpe, mamila, nasilje, območje občine, podtaknjenost, policijske akcije

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