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Making up people involved in drug markets: Punishment and protection in the policing of UK county lines

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Vulnerable people who would previously have been perceived as 'drug dealers' can now, under certain circumstances, be seen as 'victims of exploitation'; coerced or groomed into supplying drugs. Drawing on police perspectives from a large national study of 'county lines' policing in the United Kingdom (UK), this article foregrounds how competing and contradictory logics of punishment and protection are associated with policing vulnerable people involved in drug markets (PIDM) across age ranges. We illustrate how different ways of 'making up' (Hacking 1986) PIDM have varied effects, pulling towards protection for some and punishment for others, and how vulnerable PIDM are often dealt with both as victims and as offenders concurrently. We argue that the language of exploitation currently used to make sense of and respond to involvement in county lines may be ill-suited to address this issue in a systemic way and may serve to reinforce punitive logics. Consequently, there is a need to more fundamentally rethink responses in order to centre attention on the structural determinants that enable exploitative dynamics.

Keywords county lines, drug markets, exploitation, policing, vulnerability

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Introduction

Protecting vulnerable people is now a major concern for police forces in the UK. One area where this objective has gained significant attention is in the policing of so-called 'county lines': a drug distribution model originally referring to organized criminal groups in major UK cities expanding operations across counties to rural areas and the associated recruitment of vulnerable people to transport and sell drugs. The policing of county lines has taken on important symbolic and practical significance (Spicer 2025) in a way that reflects a wider 'vulnerability zeitgeist' (Brown 2015: 1) within criminal justice and policing (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron 2021; Brown *et al.* 2025; Koch 2025) and expresses 'contemporaneous punitive and humanitarian turns' (Aliverti 2020: 1117). In county lines policing, this is evident in how the commitment to protecting vulnerable people has been coupled with punitive sentiments, such as when the Labour Shadow Health Secretary at the time, Wes Streeting, argued that when it comes to county lines drug dealers, the 'war on drugs' had not even begun and that the government should have 'crushed' every drug dealer in the country because of their use and exploitation of children (Volteface Studios 2022). While much public debate has focused on the role of children in county lines, exploitation in this context affects adults as well, and responses vary widely across age ranges in terms of welfare as well as criminal justice (Alliance for Youth Justice 2025).

Drug markets have long been characterized by exploitative dynamics. Those involved in county lines have often faced significant life challenges, affected by poverty and austerity as well as histories of social care and/or youth justice involvement (Wroe 2021). Although often subjected to violence and intimidation, those caught up in county lines may see this as preferable to other ways of getting by in difficult and harmful situations (Moyle 2019). As is now widely documented, people in county lines drug networks rarely fit neatly into the binary categories of victim or perpetrator of crime, which are so fundamental within the UK criminal justice system. Much is at stake when this binary is drawn in contexts of county lines policing, as victims of county lines exploitation are at the same time involved in crimes which carry serious punishments such as the distribution of Class A drugs. Charged with the protection of vulnerable people, enforcement against perpetrators of abuse, and also prosecution of people who sell drugs, police practice in this area is fast-developing and remains opaque. Space for reclassification of vulnerable people involved in drug markets (PIDM) as potential victims introduces a range of competing and contradictory logics of policing, and how far and in what ways this translates into action on the ground is still unclear.

Based on a large national study of county lines policing which included interviews with senior officers across 44 territorial police forces in the UK, as well as interviews across three case study areas, this article contributes to advancing understanding of the logics and governing practices associated with county lines policing. In policy, practice and some academic literature, there has been a tendency to understand current changes in how PIDM are understood as a matter of increased social and governmental recognition that the people involved are *in fact* victims of exploitation. While this is an entirely valid claim, often made in the pursuit of less punitive responses for PIDM, we take it as worthwhile to consider the processes involved in this specific way of understanding PIDM as a way of better understanding the consequences for how authorities can 'act upon' them. While most studies have considered either young people as victims of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) (Marshall 2023; Shaw 2024) or vulnerable adults, often as victims of 'cuckooing' (Moyle 2019; Spicer 2021*a*), fewer studies have taken stock of these changes across age ranges, which we do in this article at a national scale (see also Marshall *et al.* 2024).

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Drawing on the ideas of Hacking (1986) and his concept of 'making up people', as well as utilizing governmentality studies in tracing the logics and governing practices associated with policing PIDM, we argue that 'making up' PIDM as victims of exploitation has many varying and complex effects on how the people caught up in county lines are governed. Rather than taking the process of positioning some PIDM as victims as 'natural' or a matter of recognizing victimization which was always there, we instead assess the implications of 'making up' some PIDM as 'victims' and others as 'offenders'. Using this distinctive lens, we set out to explore what the 'victim of exploitation' category has done and is doing to the policing of county lines. In doing so, we are mindful that this category is still forming, is still being contested and the consequences of its introduction remain largely undetermined. With national coverage of police perspectives providing opportunity for a closer look at procedures involved, we find that current practices oscillate between punishment and protection imperatives and operate together to shape responses to exploitation. The focus on how PIDM are 'made up' as victims or perpetrators of exploitation shows the urgent need to challenge logics which individualize harm and culpability, to more fundamentally rethink responses that centre attention on the structural determinants that enable exploitative dynamics.

Policing exploitation in county lines drug markets

There has been growing attention to and criminalization of perpetrators of exploitation; new 'folk devils' of the 21st century (Broad and Gadd 2023). Logics of policing in this area have long been underpinned by the binary of the exploited/vulnerable victim requiring protection and the evil perpetrator who must be punished (Gadd and Broad 2018; O'Connell Davidson 2010). Modern Slavery legislation was not designed to respond to county lines, but criminal exploitation of PIDM now sits firmly within this landscape, officially tackled by UK police forces as an offence under Section 1 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 as a subcategory of forced labour, with Section 45 setting out a defence for people who are victims of human trafficking that exempts them from the crimes they may have committed as part of their exploitation.

Changing responses to what is now known as Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) have also framed the language to understand exploitation in the context of drug markets in important ways. The focus on how children and young people under 18 could be 'groomed' and manipulated into sexual activities has paved the way for new understandings of how young people similarly can be groomed into undertaking criminal activities, such as drug distribution, leading to the similar label of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) (HMICFRS 2024). There has also been increased attention to the vulnerability of some adults involved in drug markets, especially in the context of 'cuckooing', a practice of taking over a person's home often to use it as a base for storing or selling drugs (Bainbridge *et al.* 2025). As well as 'home takeovers', adults may be exploited in various other ways, including for transporting and delivering drugs (Harding 2020: 47; Moyle 2019).

While PIDM may increasingly be understood as having significant 'vulnerability' on the one hand, they are still often understood to have 'culpability' in drug offences on the other. Whilst policy gestures to vulnerability, interpretations among front-line staff may 'subvert policy intent' (Shaw 2024: 241), and a lack of clear guidance has been said to lead to variable decision-making in policing efforts (Espeute and Lanskey 2023). Focusing on youth offending provision in one local area in England, Marshall (2024*a*, 2024*b*) showed how achieving victim status was dependent on young people sharing information with practitioners, accepting intended acts of care and not being involved in recruiting others;

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with the powerful victim/offender binary excluding many vulnerable young people from adequate support. Recent national research has pointed to great variability across police forces in how young people and vulnerable adults involved in drug markets are processed, with age as a central factor differentiating responses (Alliance for Youth Justice 2025; Coomber *et al*. 2025).

Focus on criminal exploitation in drug markets is bound up with strategic agendas to criminalize and deter those involved in drug supply; by charging them as 'enslavers' or 'exploiters' using modern slavery offences, carrying strong moral stigma and potential for longer custodial sentences (Spicer 2021*b*: 146–9). Alexandrescu and Spicer (2023) suggest that ambitions to protect young people from exploitation can amplify punitive responses towards those classified as the more 'senior dealers', who often sit only slightly higher up in the hierarchy and may still be under 18. Marshall *et al.* (2024) point to an emergence of new victims in contemporary drugs policing, including people experiencing drug dependence, CCE and 'cuckooing', but also how these victims often conflict with officers' expectations around victimhood. Tracing close associations with 'gangs policing', Koch *et al.* (2024) found that county lines interventions amplified and reproduced class oppression and racism, with young Black men particularly ill served or directly harmed.

Official data from the Home Office and Ministry of Justice provides important insights into how all this has translated in patterns of punishment and protection. Referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), the government framework for identifying potential victims of modern slavery, have significantly increased in recent years. In 2024 'county lines' accounted for 10% of all referrals, with 76% of these referrals being for males under the age of 18 (Home Office 2025*a*). One recent evaluation of the County Lines Programme suggested that this did not result in a statistically significant increase in NRM referrals but was associated with an increase in law enforcement activities (Home Office 2025*b*). Comparing the number of sentences for Class A sentences among 10–17-year-olds and aged 18+ (Figure 1) from 2010 to 2023, we found that while the number of adult sentences for

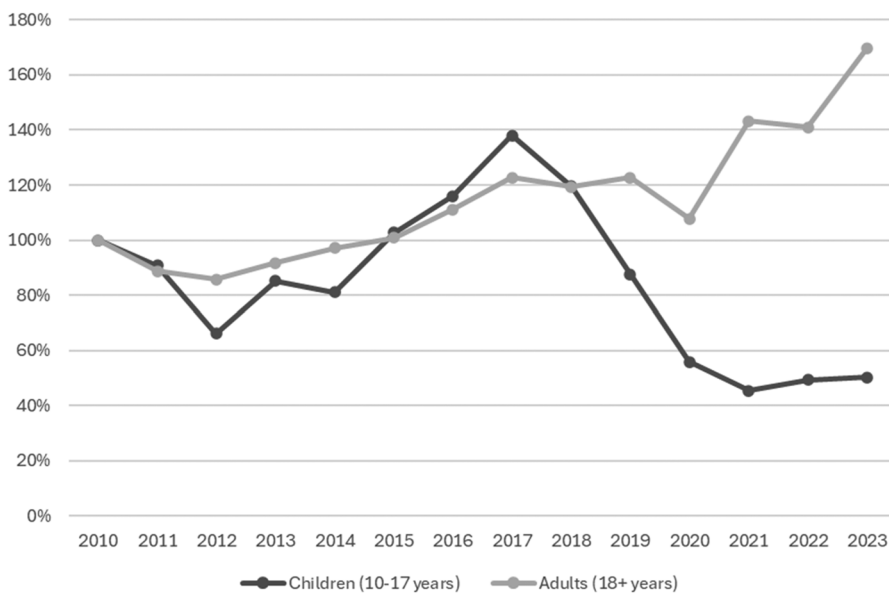


Fig. 1 People sentenced for Class A drug production and possession with intent to supply, by age (index 2010 = 100)

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drug supply have increased over the period, the number of sentences for those under 18 have dropped since 2017, potentially reflecting shifting approaches to children involved in supply (Ministry of Justice 2024).

Racial disproportionality is a notable backdrop. Approximately 25% of children aged 10–17 in England and Wales are racially minoritized, but the numbers of racially minoritized children sentenced for possession with intent to supply Class A drugs frequently exceeds the numbers of White children sentenced, with racial disparities more pronounced for sentenced children than for adults[1] (Ministry of Justice 2024). Racialized data sharing practices and profiling have also been noted in studies of county lines multi-agency safeguarding partnerships (Wroe 2021). Whilst more needs to be done to understand official data in this arena, across both measurements of protection and indicators of punishment, close entanglements of care and control under the banner of county lines certainly warrant close scrutiny.

Analyzing the governing practices involved in policing exploitation in county lines

Taking a distinctive angle on these developments, we draw inspiration from Hacking's (1986) ideas on 'making up people'. Hacking (1986: 170) subscribes to the view that 'human beings and human acts come into being hand in hand with our invention of the categories labelling them'. In his work, Hacking (2007) focused especially on new categories from the social, medical and biological sciences, such as obesity, autism and multiple personality disorder, and how these changed both how people were classified and treated and how they experienced themselves. Perhaps most directly relevant for this study, Hacking (1991) wrote about 'child abuse', some 35 years ago when this category was still settling, arguing that ideas of child abuse have changed in society, which also fundamentally affected how children experience such abuse. Furthermore, he argued that introducing new classifications involves a 'looping effect' (Hacking 1995: 369): classifications may change how people understand themselves, but people may also reject or revise said classifications and thus make new or altered ones. According to Hacking (2007: 239), we may think of classifications as given and definite, but they are in fact 'moving targets'; as the way in which institutions, experts and people themselves interact with the classifications tends to invite revisions of them.

Writing about people who use drugs, Seddon (2011) utilized Hacking's concept of 'making up people' to analyze the shift in discourse in the beginning of the 1980s, in the UK and elsewhere, from the 'drug addict' to that of the 'problem drug user', arguing this did not just signal a re-labelling of something that essentially remained the same, but rather that the emergence of the 'problem drug user' represented a 'creation of a new kind of person which did not exist before and which has shaped how those so labelled are governed and controlled' (Seddon 2011: 334; see also Houborg *et al.* 2020). Similarly, people involved in drug distribution could not be thought of as 'victims of criminal exploitation' before the category of 'criminal exploitation' was 'invented' and introduced to the field of drugs policing. Koch (2026: 18) briefly gestures to the work of Hacking as relevant for analyzing 'new possibilities for thinking of drug dealers as slaves'. Similarly, Flacks (2026) has recently engaged with the idea of victims and offenders in county lines as being 'made', but focusing specifically on legal decision-making by judges, rather than decisions and meanings ascribed by police officers.

[1] The number of people sentenced where ethnicity is unrecorded and thus 'unknown' complicates analysis of this data, but the picture is still stark.

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Drawing on related theoretical resources from the field of 'governmentality studies' (Rose et al. 2006), in our analysis of the 'making' of people or 'subjects', we pay particular attention to how 'government depends upon and disseminates certain conceptions and *models of the persons* to be subjected to government' (Rose 2000: 323, emphasis in original). Governmentality studies alert us to the benefit of separating out the logics and techniques of governing practices. The logics of governing (also referred to as 'rationalities') concern the aims, assumptions and moral justifications of specific projects, as well as the notions of appropriate forms, objects and limits of power (Rose and Miller 1992). Logics are also epistemological, meaning that they are based on some understanding of the nature of the 'things' that are governed, such as what 'kinds' of people they are targeting (Rose and Miller 1992). Notably though, these logics are not necessarily logical. They can be 'conflicting' and are 'rarely coherent or comprehensive' (Rose 1999: xxii). Techniques (also referred to as 'technologies') refer to the mechanisms through which government takes place, such as the procedures involved. Techniques are the specific ways in which logics become operable and 'capable of deployment' (Rose and Miller 1992: 183). Valverde (2014) takes this further, suggesting that aspects of governing relating to 'scale' could be considered, including both temporal and spatial scale, as well as the question of jurisdiction: the question of 'who' governs the specific problem.

Governmentality studies highlight how government tends to be dispersed rather than centralized, with current procedures related to punishment and protection better understood as part of an 'assemblage of control' which is 'hesitant, incomplete, fragmentary, contradictory and contested' with the introduction of 'some new elements' and the 'maintenance of others' (Rose 2000: 321–22). In this article, we report from an empirical investigation but specifically to explore how and to what extent the introduction of the 'victim of criminal exploitation' into drugs policing in the UK has changed current governing practices related to both the punishment and protection of vulnerable PIDM. Importantly, in arguing that some PIDM are 'made up' as 'victims of exploitation', we do not aim to neglect nor minimize the harms they may experience, nor do we want to suggest that these harms are somehow not 'real'. We instead explore how categorizing PIDM as 'drug dealers' is *also* a very specific way of making these people up, and one that has been criticized in the extant literature, which points to several 'myths' around PIDM that serve to dehumanize and demonize these people (Coomber 2006), contrary to research evidence pointing to how many PIDM do not fit with long-standing stereotypes of 'drug dealers' (see Søgaard and Bræmer 2023). As Spicer (2025) notes, the very term 'county lines' is ill-defined and research that simply aims to uncover 'new' developments in this 'model' of drug distribution risks taking it for granted. Similarly, we argue for the need to destabilize taken-for-granted assumptions about the people who are involved in this phenomenon.

Methods: a national study of county lines, policing and vulnerability

This article draws on data from a large national study of the policing of county lines. The aim of this study was to develop understandings of how vulnerability was understood and tackled in the context of county lines drug markets. To gain an understanding of this, the project involved a multi-stage approach. The first stage was 50 semistructured interviews with senior officers from 44 of the 45 police forces in the UK (including the British Transport Police), focused on investigating police responses to the involvement of young people and vulnerable adults in county lines. This was followed by 'deep dive' rapid appraisals in three force/safeguarding partnership areas in both the north and the south of England,

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exploring policing responses to county lines from additional points of view and in greater depth in different contexts. The rapid appraisals comprised 58 interviews, encompassing interviews with police officers (n = 26), statutory agencies and NGOs (n = 15) and people with lived experience of exploitation in the context of drug markets (n = 17), as well as three 'ride-alongs' with officers plus observations of partnership safeguarding meetings. An additional nine interviews were conducted with national stakeholders, including representatives from the National County Lines Coordination Centre, the College of Policing, the Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme, the National Police Chiefs' Council and NGOs providing support and guidance to local authority safeguarding partnerships. Across the two phases, we interviewed 117 people, comprising the largest national study of county lines policing in the UK (see Coomber *et al.* 2025). In this article, we report from the interviews with the police across all elements of the study to bring to the fore their logics and the governing practices involved in policing PIDM.

Officers interviewed were at both front-line and management levels, including Constables, Sergeants, Inspectors, Chief Inspectors and Superintendents, with the majority being Inspectors and Chief Inspectors. We sought out 'force leads' for either county lines or criminal exploitation who had strategic oversight and/or knowledge about force procedures and organization. Interviews with front-line officers were organized with the help of management, meaning the sample may be inclined towards officers working more closely within organizational policies. Interviews were conducted either in-person or online via Microsoft Teams. Interviews were based on a semistructured interview guide covering questions about the organization of the drug market in their locality; understandings of vulnerability, and organizational structures and procedures for dealing with criminal exploitation. An advisory group with representatives from agencies working in the field also supported methods, and in partnership with the NGO Revolving Doors, two meetings were held with a group of county lines experts by experience who advised on the focus, methods and analysis of findings.

All interviews were thematically coded in NVivo. Analysis was conducted using an iterative, interpretive approach. Following initial coding by two researchers, for this article two members of the research team re-engaged with the dataset to further develop and refine themes, guided by an analytical approach focused on how PIDM were being 'made up' and the logics and practices involved. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of York. Names, study locations and employers have been anonymized and potentially identifying details have been removed. Whilst interviewing police officers about their work might not yield entirely accurate accounts, such interviews about how they understood and tackled vulnerability in the context of county lines still provide us with an important window into the logics and techniques associated with this domain of policing.

Findings

Emerging logics of protection

Officers from forces across the UK articulated that there had been significant changes in how the police perceived vulnerable PIDM in recent years. As already well-established in other empirical studies related primarily to children (Marshall 2023; Shaw 2024) or vulnerable adults in drug markets (Spicer *et al.* 2020), they noted how the approach had changed from a blanket response of prosecution to one where they considered more carefully the role of the person involved. One officer said that three to four years ago 'every single person that was arrested with drugs was prosecuted, and that was that […]

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there was no if, buts, maybes […] you're a drug dealer', but that practice had shifted significantly:

> Now, we realise that that's obviously not the case, so there's been a real sea change […] [with] further research into, well, what role do they have? (Detective Inspector, Small Force[2])

Changes were linked to a wider and increasing recognition of vulnerabilities across police forces in recent years. However, officers also acknowledged that vulnerability and victim recognition was a dilemma, saying: 'the hardest call is assessing that vulnerability and deciding are they a victim or are they a perpetrator'. (Senior Investigating Officer, Large Police Force). Another officer elaborated how dealing with recategorization from 'offender' to 'victim' involved fundamental tensions that went to the heart of policing's mission:

> … when you get into exploitation, actually that blurring of the lines between; are you a victim? are you a perpetrator? Actually, it's all blurred. You're all everything at the same time […] We're comfortable with people as victims of stuff. We can apply those lenses. We're not so comfortable when we have to apply those lenses to people who are doing naughty stuff […] that tapped into something cultural and historic in policing, which was: we lock up naughty people (Inspector, Medium Police Force)

Some cases were clearer cut, with age often treated as a key factor. Many officers were prepared to view younger teenagers as victims of exploitation instead of 'drug dealers': 'No 14- or 15-year-old is in a position to be a major drug dealer, are they? They're clearly being exploited' (Inspector, Large Force). However, these emerging logics of protection associated with exploitation also connected to competing logics around punishment, shaped by ideas about vulnerability, race, gender, demeanours and behaviours.

Competing logics of punishment

Officers articulated clear limits around how far vulnerability and victimhood could extend in the context of 'dealing' drugs. Emphasis on individual autonomy, with value and emphasis placed upon 'choice, personal responsibility, control over one's own fate, self-promotion and self-government' (Rose 2000: 329) took centre stage and connected strongly with logics of punishment and culpability. Again, age was significant here. Resolute dismissal of younger children as drug dealers was often complicated when the police came across those slightly 'older' between 15 and 17:

> Our cohort are 15- to 17-year-olds predominantly, and that throws up a whole host of issues, because our 15-year-olds look like adults […] They'll fight like adults, they'll speak like adults (National context interview)

As indicated here, how the young people 'looked' might matter just as much as their actual age. The temporalization, or temporal scale, of 'age' was not merely based on powerful legal divisions between children and adults, but was also qualitative and subjective to a certain extent, which may be at odds with recognizing children's needs, vulnerabilities and legal rights to be treated as children (Davis and Marsh 2020). How Black children can be seen as 'less vulnerable and more adult-like' (Davis and Marsh 2020: 255) was also

[2] Small forces designate those with fewer than approximately 2,000 personnel; medium forces those between 2,000 and 4,000; large forces those above 4,000.

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highlighted as an issue by a practitioner from the Youth Justice Service, who discussed the physicality in terms of gender, race and age as mattering in a response to one boy they worked with, with important effects on classificatory processing:

> … he was 13 then. Black lad, but massive, big, big boy. Looked a lot older than 13. His experience would have been that they would have stopped him, cuffed him, searched him […] I personally can remember sitting in meetings and saying he was 12 when he was first picked up. This is a 12-year-old boy. Can I just stop you speaking? 12 years old, 12 year old boy […] the adultification of young men, more than women, is just huge (Youth Justice Practitioner, Head of Service)

Another officer relayed a case involving a boy who was 15 and seen as having a high position within the racially minoritized group he was part of:

> Those three groups were Black males […] This 15-year-old male was six-foot-four, a real muscular lad […] there was also plenty of intelligence to suggest that they sat within a decent level, even at 15. Probably because of the physical size and presence […] Even though this lad [was a] 15-year-old enforcer, no matter what you think, he was still vulnerable in the sense that he'd been involved in the county line groups since he was 12. Within three years, because he's ended up becoming such a huge physical presence within the group, he's then became a 15-year-old gang leader (Detective Chief Inspector, Small Force)

Here, as well as age, sense-making around vulnerability is strongly connected to concerns around 'race', gender and physical stature. Other officers emphasized that age was crucial but not necessarily enough to recategorize a 'drug dealer' as a 'victim of exploitation' and that '… just because somebody's a 16-year-old child involved in drugs doesn't necessarily mean they've been exploited or [are] a victim of crime.' (Detective Superintendent, Medium Force).

A key classificatory logic was that adults, even when young and facing significant adversities, were culpable where there was not obvious third-party coercion: 'If it was somebody over 18 who wasn't displaying anything like that, who wasn't raising any coercive control defences, I think it would be treated as another adult drug dealer' (Detective Superintendent, Small Force). For adults to stand a chance of protection rather than punishment, a range of vulnerabilities, including drug dependence, mental health issues and housing issues, needed to be evident (see also Moyle 2019):

> I'm being typecast, but Big Issue sellers, homeless people, they are forced. Not always, but often, they are forced to actually deal drugs […] I don't think filling the prisons up with them is our role anymore. I think we need to see them as vulnerable (Detective Chief Inspector, Medium Force)

Another notable punitive logic was that people who started recruiting and 'grooming' others should be held accountable and brought to justice for this:

> We can't just carte blanche say we're not going to prosecute children because sometimes it's actually older children that are exploiting younger children, and they should be held accountable for that (Detective Inspector, Small Force)

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Some PIDM were referred to by the term 'alpha victims', explained as 'essentially victims of grooming themselves who grow up [and] start recruiting others [and] become perpetrators of slavery offences themselves' (Detective Inspector, Small Force). The use of this label illustrates how vulnerabilities associated with age, childhood adversity and past victimization were in tension with deeply ingrained occupational logics around punishment, which often 'outweighed' protective logics:

> … he's 17, and he was what I would term as an alpha victim […] If we'd have cottoned on to him a couple of years ago, he'd have been a victim. Groomed, followed that grooming model […] He's transitioned across that void where he's exploiting others, and it's really unpalatable because he's still a child, but he's so deeply ingrained and entrenched he's moved up that food chain to exploit others (Detective Inspector, Large Force)

Surfacing long-running tensions where older children fail to live up to widely held expectations associated with childhood vulnerability (Brown 2015), this officer also emphasized that if someone did not make the right choices and take the help and support that was offered to remove themselves from exploitative situations, this was a trigger for criminalization and punishment:

> …if you don't want help, then you must be an offender […] We're reaching out to you to give you an opportunity to be treated as a victim, now's your chance to take that, and if you don't, we'll criminalise you, and we'll take your property off you, and we'll make sure that you can't be victimised again by taking quite a hard line with you (Detective Inspector, Large Force)

This officer noted that although everyone probably starts as a victim when they first get involved, when their involvement progresses, they might not meaningfully be categorized as victims anymore. This illustrates a certain 'temporality' of involvement, with innocence, vulnerability and grooming *by* others emphasized at the beginning of involvement and culpability, active choice and grooming *of* others increasingly emphasized as involvement progresses:

> Once they're involved in it and then they're aware of what else they can—how support—how they can get out of it or the consequences that they're - what risks they might get themselves involved in. Once that's aware to them and they keep doing it […] At that point, I wouldn't say he's a victim (Sergeant, Large Force)

Officers engaged in the 'responsibilization' of vulnerable PIDM by arguing that they were responsible for taking the 'opportunity' to be treated as a 'victim' and accepting the help offered. Sharing information about their exploitation was often crucial for being identified as a victim (see Marshall 2024*a*), yet it was also commonly asserted that PIDM generally did not want to speak with the police, for reasons of safety and trust: '…they don't want to be seen as a grass [someone who speaks to police]. There's too much risk around [it]' (Detective Sergeant, Medium Force). Similarly, officers would also stress how specifically young PIDM would often not identify as being vulnerable (see also Brown 2015), exploited or as a victim: '… [they] would never want to be considered vulnerable […] It's not part of who they are. It's not where they come from' (Detective Superintendent, Medium Force).

Concerns and logics related to punishment and criminal liability complicated and competed with emerging logics of protection in dealing with PIDM with perspectives and preoccupations of particular police officers, as well as the wider institutional contexts and power dynamics, shaping the patterns and textures of governing practices in this field.

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Reconciling punitive and protective logics

Looking at the governing practices that the officers engaged in, we see how protective logics mixed with an emphasis on punishment, law enforcement, and culpability, with resource and strategic pressures being a notable context shaping how concurrent tensions played out. Law enforcement imperatives were in frame alongside exploitation-focused concerns, which shaped response work in particular:

> He's under 16. He's in for taking a vehicle without consent […] Looking at the job, it was so obvious that this kid was a victim of CCE, hanging around with known OCGs [Organised Crime Groups] […] The messages that we'd seen between them were just horrific […] you've got the other pressures of a PACE clock[3], of chief inspectors raining down on you, and you're saying, hang on, this is not as easy as what's said on the tin, yet it'd be easy to lock him up and process him for taking a vehicle without consent […] but what's occurred? Why is he in that vehicle? (Constable, Medium Force)

Whilst the dynamics of exploitation are for this officer complicated to prove or disprove, law enforcement appears here as the more 'usual' technique for resolving the case; not pursuing the crime at hand is very much seen as an *alternative* course of action; one requiring more active and conscious effort as well as buy-in from seniors with competing priorities. An officer with a national remit for developing the approach to CCE similarly reflected on how time pressures at the front-line were a key barrier to better practice:

> I won't have someone in the background saying: 'can you go to the next call', and I will have the time and the ability, the connecting ability, to get all the information I need to make an informed decision, to record it properly, to share what I have and make my recommendations on the end of it. That is the, I guess, the gold standard […] we're not there yet (National context interview)

A complex interplay of different institutional imperatives operated together in each case, influencing procedure variously depending on wide-ranging factors. A great deal of discretion was involved in deciding whether to drop criminal charges against PIDM. The police sometimes did drop criminal charges early if they believed the case did not meet the CPS threshold for being in the 'public interest', with vulnerability classification playing a role in this:

> I would sometimes make the decision before you've even gone to CPS. If all the evidence is present, you're looking at public interest weightings. Is this in the public interest to continue? […] I've got a vulnerable user that's street dealing because he's being forced to. I may have made a decision there that we're not going to […] continue with an investigation into this person (Detective Sergeant, Medium Force)

This was not simply the discretion of front-line officers but crucially of higher-ranking senior officers, often at Sergeant or Inspector level, who decided whether to go ahead with the charges or not (see also Espeute and Lanskey 2023). Notably, if the police recognized someone as a victim of exploitation, dropping drug charges against them was not always

[3] This refers to the duration of time an individual can be detained in police custody without being charged under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. Usually, a maximum of 24 h is allowed (https://hmic-frs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/glossary/24-hour-pace-clock/).

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perceived as the best option available. Officers would often highlight other options, such as diversionary responses, which they perceived as a more 'positive outcome':

> Yes, so we would look for a positive outcome in terms, not just NFA [No Further Action], we'd want to get the pieces in place to divert them away from the gang/the county line (Detective Chief Inspector, Small Force)

Even where someone had a conclusive or reasonable grounds decision from the NRM to say that they had been a victim of criminal exploitation, the police still sometimes required that they engage with criminal justice interventions in return for 'suspending the sentence'[4]:

> We'll start with a child that's got a conclusive or reasonable grounds NRM. We find them in possession of 100 or 200 deals of Class A controlled drugs […] What we'll do, straight-away, is we will refer them under Outcome 22[5] to the Youth Justice Partnership–so, rather than criminalising them—we don't need an admission—but what we can say is that, 'If you agree, you're on a suspended sentence now; you are now the property of the Youth Justice Partnership and we will work with you creatively to design out your vulnerability […] If they say, 'We're not doing that any more. You can shove it, I'm going back to drug dealing' […] then we can present it warts and all to CPS for charging advice (Detective Inspector, Medium Force)

The use of 'diversion' was presented as an alternative to criminalization; but predicated on coercion through the 'threat' of being returned to a criminal sentence in the case of non-compliance, with vulnerability configured in relation to likelihood of offending rather than general suffering. Outcomes for those caught up in county lines are often assumed to be tied to a binary procedural response, where police deal with a person either as a suspect in a drugs case or as a victim of criminal exploitation. However, our findings show how people are dealt with *both* as a victim (through the NRM), but also often as an offender, with investigation into drug possession carried out by the police alongside this process. Diversion was thus another key governing technique utilized in responding to people that were 'made up' and positioned as *victims* of exploitation by officers, although this is still formally an intervention for *offenders*. Punishment and protection logics operated together as a means of managing tensions inherent in county lines policing, with discretion key in this moderation.

Discussion

In some academic literature, as well as in current policy and practice, there has been a propensity towards understanding the problem as one of 'failing' to recognize victims of exploitation, due to discretionary decision-making or institutional failings. However, representing the problem in this way also serves to reinforce the victim-offender binary, which may be misguided given the extensive overlap and the fuzzy boundaries between these

[4] Although NRM decisions can influence criminal justice proceedings, a 'reasonable grounds' or 'conclusive grounds' decision does not necessarily mean that criminal charges are dropped, as the Single Competent Authority (SCA), which is part of the Home Office, does not consider questions of criminal liability and responsibility (O'Loughlin et al. 2024: 46)

[5] 'Outcome 22' is a police outcome code for when 'diversion' is used 'as an alternative to prosecution' to 'address offending behaviour or prevent further offending' through a 'diversionary, educational or intervention activity' (NPCC 2019: 1).

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two groups. Following Hacking (1986), the description of vulnerable PIDM as 'victims of exploitation' does not represent a more 'real' or 'accurate' way of 'making up' these individuals: it represents one particular way of doing it, with consequences for how they can be acted upon. Using Hacking's ideas, we see how the focus on exploitation is a 'double-edged' sword that can enable less punitive approaches for some of those involved but may criminalize others even more intensely as 'exploiters', especially adults and people who have long been targets for drug law enforcement.

Tracing the emergence of the 'victim of exploitation' in county lines policing is a difficult task. While this new category is likely facilitated by emerging conceptions of vulnerability that are taking on increasing significance in the policing domain (Aliverti 2020; Brown *et al.* 2025), including ambitions to safeguard victims of abuse, it may also have its more concrete origins in the aspirations of the police to further criminalize some PIDM through the use of the Modern Slavery legislation (Spicer 2021*b*). However, this move to 'make up' (Hacking 1986) people involved in drug distribution as 'exploiters' may also, perhaps inadvertently, have introduced the 'victim of exploitation' to the context of drug markets. As our findings illustrate, the creation of this new kind of person opens up new ways of managing and governing PIDM, at least in theory, but it also introduces ambiguities into county lines policing, which officers found difficult to work with in a way that prompted them to continue to draw boundaries between groups to retain coherence and reconcile conflicting logics of punishment and protection. Policing responses were in a state of flux; with the parameters of the distinctions between victims and (vulnerable) offenders still being settled, both at the discursive level of the institutional logics of the police and the criminal justice system, but especially in the actual techniques they utilized and the governing practices that they engaged in. In that respect, the 'making up' of the victim of exploitation in county lines is only partial and far from replacing the older notion of the 'drug dealer', even amidst officers' emphasis on changing practices.

Instead of a simple classification as 'offender' or 'victim', logics of punishment and responsibility coexisted with ideas about protection and vulnerability in relation to PIDM. In particular, there were notable effects of what one officer termed the 'void' in reasoning, where people do not neatly fit the category of exploited or exploiter, but where they instead bridge and blend these labels. Sense-making in these cases was rooted in police officers' feelings, backgrounds and contexts, including those at the management level (Espeute and Lanskey 2023), showing how people involved in drug markets are 'made up' by the synergistic process of human action and classification; contingent and movable rather than static and predictable. In addition, officers were commonly under pressure to 'solve' their cases as quickly as possible and move on to the next job, with drug enforcement imperatives and techniques hardwired as the default grounds for 'making up' and reacting to those (potentially) involved in county lines.

Age was one of the most fundamental classificatory markers involved in 'making up' PIDM as 'victims of exploitation' or not. The significance of age also appears in official data on drug convictions, which shows a decrease in 10- to 17-year-olds convicted for Class A drug production and possession with intent to supply since 2017 (Figure 1) but an increase for those aged 18 or over. Our findings indicated changing approaches towards those under 18, at least in theory, but such changes were a lot less clear for those who were older. Young adults, for example, who might sit only slightly higher up in the hierarchy of an organized crime group and, as officers noted, often have histories of being exploited themselves, would not be prime targets for protection practices. Conversely, some young adults, especially those who are racially minoritized, may in fact risk being further criminalized as 'exploiters' when other PIDM are 'made up' as victims of their exploitation, such

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as when new people are 'recruited' or 'cuckooed' (see also Alexandrescu and Spicer 2023; Koch 2024). Importantly, age was not only important as an 'objective' legal category used to divide between children and adults by law but was also important as perceived maturity and 'adultness'; officers pointed to the importance of physical stature, build and supposedly 'adult-like' appearance. In that regard, those who are perceived as 'troublesome' may be the least likely to fit the frame of vulnerability carved out for victims of exploitation, even though they may be the ones who are the most exposed (Brown 2019).

Our findings illustrate that when PIDM were 'made up' as 'exploited', they were still not necessarily treated as fully fledged victims. A notable finding was the prominence nationally of three implicit conceptual categories which characterize how vulnerable PIDM are processed in policing and beyond; 'victim', 'offender' and 'vulnerable offender'. Those falling far short of the 'ideal victim' (Christie 1986) were most likely to be fully criminalized for the drug offences they engaged in, while those who fit the ideal better, such as younger (White) children, were more likely to be treated as 'victims', illustrating how classifications 'tend to invite stereotypes' (Hacking 2007: 287). However, those who fell between these categories seemed to be treated more as 'vulnerable offenders', having their vulnerability recognized, but also subjected to techniques associated with offender management, such as diversion schemes. That victim-based pathways were being blended and elided with perpetrator processing and occurring at the same time is significant; while diversionary responses may rest on welfarist intentions, studies have shown that these can be experienced as highly punitive (Sandøy 2020), even though practitioners and policy-makers may position them as 'supportive' (Kammersgaard 2025). Although diversionary measures may entail a 'less criminalizing' response, they are nevertheless tools for offender management and not victim support.

Victims of exploitation in drug markets must align themselves with a certain 'regime of truth'; one which stipulates that county lines distribution networks are made up of 'exploiters' and those who are 'exploited', and, in so doing, constitute themselves as 'legible subjects' of this way of governing (Butler 2016: 78). Yet studies have underlined how people caught up in county lines may not see themselves and their relations to others this way (Marshall 2022). While these relations may often be exploitative and harmful, they may also be perceived as mutually beneficial by both parties and may even be initiated by the 'exploited' party (Spicer *et al.* 2020). This suggests a dissonance between some vulnerable people's presentation, experience and understanding of self and officers' desire to, in Hacking's (1986) terms, 'make up' PIDM as either victims or offenders. We can, of course, argue that when people do not recognize themselves as victims of exploitation, this is due to a lack of awareness and ability to see how they are being mistreated and taken advantage of, but we can also take such renunciations more seriously. While Hacking (1995) argued that a 'looping effect' may occur when people classified in certain ways responded to these classifications in ways that prompt revisions of them, such revisions do not seem to be taking place in this context, and the exploiter/exploited categorization remains a classification system mostly deployed by the authorities, rather than by the people classified (Broad and Gadd 2023).

Valverde (2014) alerts us to the importance of considering jurisdiction in questions of governing and how the 'who' often ends up determining the 'how' of government. As our findings show, victims of exploitation in county lines that are found in possession of large quantities of Class A drugs tend to fall under the jurisdiction of the police and the criminal justice system. While referrals are made to other authorities, the police retain jurisdiction over 'the crime' and thus ultimately over whether PIDM are criminalized or not. A change

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in jurisdiction away from the criminal justice system and towards welfare systems, where these assume a greater role and responsibility for responding to vulnerable PIDM, could potentially reconfigure responses more fundamentally. No matter how attuned police are to the challenges of vulnerability, casting police as the primary agency of response in contexts of county lines exploitation will always rest on institutional logics ill-matched to respond to the complexities and ambiguities of vulnerability as it is lived and experienced (see Revolving Doors Lived Experience Members 2024).

Responding to long-standing issues of exploitation in drug markets through the dividing practice of separating people into exploiters and exploited fundamentally casts the problem as an interpersonal one, rather than a systemic or socio-structural one. This interpersonal scale encourages an 'atomistic' view of the communities involved (Valverde 2014), obscuring the harms that criminalization and the 'war on drugs' has caused especially racially and other minoritized communities, and how vulnerability may extend far beyond those 'lucky' enough to be 'made up' as victims of exploitation (Cooper 2015; Shiner *et al.* 2018). As some academics (Coomber 2006; 2010) and drug policy advocacy organizations (Drug Policy Alliance 2019: 3) have urged in recent years, rather than splitting PIDM into 'evil drug dealers' and 'exploited victims', it may be more beneficial to fundamentally 'rethink' and resituate 'the drug dealer'.

Conclusion

There is an urgent need to move beyond assumptions that a focus on exploitation simply leads to positive outcomes for vulnerable people caught up in drug markets. To 'make up' some PIDM as 'victims of exploitation' involves concurrent governing practices of punishment and protection, producing diverse outcomes for different people at different times and spaces. Our findings point to how we may want to take PIDM more seriously when some reject being labelled 'victims of exploitation'. This does not simply mean that they must then be perpetrators, as one of the interviewed police officers argued, but rather that there is too much distance between the lived realities of those involved and the current language to make sense of these situations. This begs the question of whether additional 'looping' or rethinking of these categories may be needed if current policy and practice in this area is to respond to PIDM and their vulnerabilities in a meaningful way. While this article has productively focused on the views of the police as a useful window into this area, the experiences of those affected by these conceptual and practical shifts are vital in future studies to more fully grapple with the implications of these changes in policing.

After this study was conducted, new legislation in the UK has made CCE and cuckooing standalone offences as part of the government's Crime and Policing Bill. This also introduces new 'child criminal exploitation civil preventative orders', which allow courts to impose certain requirements and prohibitions, also without a criminal trial, on those 'at risk' of committing CCE. This signals onus on prosecuting perpetrators and perhaps less concern with protecting victims, both from harms attached to drug market involvement, but also from harms associated with drug law enforcement itself. As drug laws tend to mainly impact those at the lower rungs of the drug market hierarchy, the effects of this new legislation should be carefully evaluated. With increasing attention to exploitation in drug markets in other countries (see EMCDDA and Europol 2024; Søgaard *et al.* 2026), and given the potential role of the UK as a policy 'frontrunner' on this matter internationally, it is of paramount importance that any 'exports' of the policies and practices happen with attention to both the potential benefits and potential harms of making up PIDM in these particular ways.

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Vulnerability as experienced by those involved in county lines cannot be disentangled from the social, economic and political environments that produce it (Moyle 2019). A focus on the plight of those at the lower levels of drug dealing hierarchies through current understandings of 'exploitation' potentially goes some way towards a 'rethinking' of PIDM, but efforts to do this also carry risks of losing sight of the injustices and vulnerabilities which are intensified under the same banner. To take vulnerability seriously would be to attend to the long-running harms of drug distribution and drugs policing, as experienced disproportionately by communities who have contended with the most extreme forms of marginalization, racialized policing, economic disadvantage and trauma (Bacon and Spicer 2023). Governance mechanisms in policy and practice should take proactive account of this so that logics of county lines policing do not enable distraction from addressing the wider social conditions that enable and drive harmful drug market practices and the recruitment and exploitation of vulnerable PIDM; continuing austerity politics, advanced marginality, drastically unequal life opportunities and increased deprivation in both inner-city and rural areas (see Spicer 2021*c*). The language of exploitation currently used to make sense of and respond to involvement in county lines may be ill-suited to address this issue in a systemic way and may serve to reinforce punitive logics and solutions. Consequently, we suggest moving towards classifications and practices that better match the needs, vulnerabilities and lived realities of all of those involved.

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