

Institution: University of West London		
Unit of Assessment: UOA 20 - Social Work and Social Policy		
Title of case study: County Lines: enabling public agencies, police and communities to respond to the evolution of gang crime		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2017 - 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Simon Harding	Role(s) (e.g., job title): Professor of Criminology and Director of the National Centre for Gang Research	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: Oct 2017 to date
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Jan 2018 – Dec 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) Urban street gangs and drug dealing underpin rising rates of serious youth violence and knife crime. Gangs' regional and national drug distribution networks, known as "County Lines", present a challenge to the police, public agencies and communities. Professor Simon Harding's recent ethnographic research provided novel granular insights into the rapid evolution of these gangs and their impact on young people. Harding has been invited to present his findings and their implications to MPs, civil service policy teams, the police and policing agencies, local authorities and communities. The approach to County Lines by these agencies has been informed and aided by this up-to-date evidence and there is an increased willingness to adopt the comprehensive partnership response advocated by Harding. Harding's findings have also attracted national press coverage, helping the public understand this important issue.		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) Professor Simon Harding has a well-established track-record of researching urban street gangs (USGs), offering fresh insights into their evolution, internal dynamics, and status. Harding's conceptualisation of 'street capital' as <i>the</i> effective currency within USGs has made a unique contribution to gang scholarship both in the UK and internationally. Harding was awarded the Frederick Milton Thrasher Award for Superior Gang Research by the National Gang Crime Research Centre in Chicago in August 2014. This case study is based on the impact of his two-year research project into "county lines", which began in 2017, and was published in 2020 as a monograph, <i>County Lines: Exploitation and drug dealing amongst urban street gangs</i> . [R1] County Lines – as defined by the UK National Crime Agency – are where illegal drugs are transported from one area to another, often across police and local authority boundaries (although not exclusively), usually by children or vulnerable people who are coerced into it by gangs. The 'County Line' is the mobile phone line used to take the orders of drugs. Importing areas (areas where the drugs are taken to) are reporting increased levels of violence and weapons-related crimes as a result of this trend. (https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/drug-trafficking/county-lines) Harding's ethnographic research study into county lines examined how London-based USGs established drug networks into Kent, with his analysis employing theoretical perspectives of Social Field Analysis from Bourdieu and Street Capital Theory. His research utilised over 80 qualitative interviews of active county line participants including 'line managers', runners/dealers and users; police; and other local stakeholders. Uniquely, Harding conceptualised the drug dealing networks through a marketing and business lens drawing upon the principles of marketing and deployment of customer satisfaction techniques to build competitive advantage. His research has revealed the key critical overarching issues underpinning youth violence in the UK and where/why/how it is now presenting. He concluded that serious youth violence is now elevated due to the convergence of three social domains interacting simultaneously, namely:- the rapid evolution of UK USGs, the rapid evolution of UK drug markets and the contributory		

impact of social media amongst young people as both facilitator and instigator. He revealed changing age patterns of USG's with age ranges extending downwards to under 14's but with older members in their mid-20's remaining "stuck" in USGs.

Going deeper into his research, he articulated in detail how these evolutions now present and work. Key amongst this was identifying increased competition between USG and the drug dealing crews who rush to get their product to the end-user in a process Harding called the "Dial-a-Dealer" phenomenon.

Within his research, Harding uncovered a range of internal dynamics in drug dealing centering on his development of different drug dealing behavioural typologies. He identified critical local push/pull factors which explain why county lines might appear in a seaside town. By interviewing young people involved in drug dealing he theorised and demonstrated how internal management and control mechanisms (The Control Repertoire) was employed by Elders to keep dealers ('runners') under control, and in debt, so that the line managers can maintain profit margins. By interviewing stakeholders, he identified numerous issues which led to multi-agency partnerships failing to address the arrival of a new county line in their town, e.g., by showing how barriers to data-sharing impeded effective resolutions.

Significantly his research revealed that all county lines fall into one of four operating models. He proposed a typology of these four differentiated models demonstrating how they operate on a spectrum from traditional drug deal and classic county lines, to highly advanced marketing models. The determining factor for advancing through this spectrum is that new county lines become much more sophisticated in marketing techniques and thus more professionalized.

Harding's conclusions offered multiple proposals about how public authorities could re-orientate their approaches to better address these issues, emphasising the need for improved and comprehensive multi-agency partnership working.

Alongside this study, Harding has co-produced research with colleagues in Scotland and the USA on USG organisation and robbery [R2]; on drug markets and distribution [R3 and R4]; and generated findings on robbery typologies and Scottish drug networks, and gang affiliation within schools [R5]. His guest-edited special issue of the *Journal of Youth Justice* [R6] argued knife-carrying constituted logical action offering empowerment for young people. Harding's contemporary research into the impact of Covid-19 on functioning drug markets was fed rapidly into current debates in 2020, as outlined in section four.

This body of work has supported the establishment of the National Centre for Gang Research in 2019, led by Harding, at the University of West London.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1. Harding, S. (2020) *County Lines: Exploitation and Drug Dealing among Urban Street Gangs*, Bristol University Press, ISBN 978-152920308
- R2. Harding, Simon, Deuchar, R., Densley, J. and McLean, R. (2018) A typology of street robbery and gang organization: Insights from qualitative research in Scotland. *British Journal of Criminology*, 59 (4). pp. 879-897. DOI: 10.1093/bjc/azy064
- R3. Densley, J., McLean, R., Deuchar, R. and Harding, S. (2018). An altered state? Emergent changes to illicit drug markets and distribution networks in Scotland. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 58: 113–120 (August 2018). DOI: 10.1016/j.drugpo.2018.05.011
- R4. McLean, Robert, Deuchar, Ross, Harding, Simon and Densley, James (2018) Putting the 'street' in gang: place and space in the organization of Scotland's drug-selling gangs. *British Journal of Criminology*, 59 (2). pp. 396-415. DOI: 10.1093/bjc/azy015
- R5. Irwin-Rogers, K. and Harding, S. (2018) The effects of gang involvement on pupil attitudes and behaviour: When two social fields collide, *British Educational Research Journal*, 44 (3). pp. 463-479. DOI: 10.1002/berj.3442
- R6. Youth Justice Journal: Special Issue: Street Gangs, Group Offending and Violence; Volume 20 Issue 1-2, April-August 2020. DOI: 10.1177/1473225420902848; includes Harding, S.

(2020) Getting to the point? Reframing narratives on knife crime, DOI:
10.1177/1473225419893781

Quality statement: The review of R1 in the British Journal of Criminology said “The book offers perhaps the most holistic analysis of county lines activity so far, and Harding expertly presents an informed and unflinching account of the realities of those exploited and exploiting within Britain’s contemporary drug landscape. Most crucially, this book manages what many criminological texts often fail to do; it offers empirical data and new theoretical insight, as well as insightful policy recommendations” <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azaa075>. R2, R3, R4, R5 and R6 have all been published in peer-reviewed journals. R1, R2 and R3 have been submitted as outputs in REF 2021.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Harding’s close understanding of the evolution of USGs, their significance in the proliferation of county lines networks and links to serious youth violence have informed and influenced initiatives by parliamentarians, policy makers in government, police and policing agencies, local agencies and the public.

Influencing public policy on county lines

In March 2019, Harding provided oral evidence for the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee Report on Serious Youth Violence. [S1] In doing so Harding drew directly on his research for *County Lines* [R1], for instance in suggesting better integration between police and youth services based on his experience of “ride-alongs” with the police in Kent and Medway [S1, Q194]. The broader insights from Harding’s research were directly reflected in a section of the Committee’s report headed “The evolution of the ‘gang’” [S2, para 79-83] which referred closely to his evidence, and in its recommendations for concerted action on county lines to address the “24/7 ‘dial-a-dealer’ drug culture” [S2, recommendation 20].

Most significantly, one of the Committee’s recommendations on data-sharing between agencies, which was accepted by the government [S2, para 114], was influenced by Harding’s evidence on the need for this activity to be “reinflated, reenergised and reinvigorated” [S2, para 112]. The government response to the Committee’s report said it:

recognises that tackling serious youth violence, including county lines and the associated exploitation of children and young people, needs an approach involving policing and other agencies working together with a focus on enforcement, prevention and early intervention. To do this, we must bring organisations together to share information, data and intelligence and encourage them to work in concert rather than in isolation [S3].

Government plans for a Serious Violence Bill to address these issues were included in the December 2019 Queen’s Speech as the government’s plan for future legislation [S4, p.69].

Harding’s research findings led him to be frequently consulted for advice and input by policy staff in central government. For example, in November 2019 he was invited to brief the Cabinet Office Serious Violence Team on improving the cross-government response to serious violence. In May 2020 he was selected to join a Home Office Serious Violence Unit roundtable identifying trends and drivers behind serious violence with discussions focusing on the possible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The DfE “Behaviour, Exclusion, Attendance, Alternative Provision and Preventing Serious Violence Division” invited Harding to make a presentation drawing on his research work to the Division in June 2020 which contributed to shaping their policy and practice. [S5]

Expert advice and training for policing agencies

Harding has worked closely with police and crime agencies at senior levels, helping them identify how to respond effectively to the changing pattern of county-line related crime and to protect people most vulnerable to its effect, especially through inter-agency collaboration.

From 2017 to 2019, Harding provided expert advice to HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) as a member of their Serious Organised Crime Expert Reference Group; he was the only UK criminologist on the group and participated extensively in their bi-monthly meetings. This group established inspection criteria for a Thematic Review of police

forces in England & Wales in the 2018 Serious Organised Crime Methodology for Inspection; in this, Harding's contribution foregrounded the need to seek evidence of partnership-working, community engagement and data-sharing. These issues can be seen highlighted in chapter 3 of the subsequent report *Both sides of the coin: The police and National Crime Agency's response to vulnerable people in 'county lines' drug offending* (HMICFRS, Jan 2020), which noted that barriers to information sharing undermine effective partnership working and recommended a Home Office review of this (p.20).

Harding has delivered 47 presentations and training sessions on these issues for the police and related agencies, with attendance ranging from 25 to 300. More recently, he delivered a keynote presentation as the sole speaker external to the Metropolitan Police Investigations and Intelligence CPD Conference, in December 2020. The audience were specialist Violent Crime Task Forces and associated Violence Investigation units, CID investigators across the MPS Commands and Intelligence Analysts, totalling over 200 attendees on the day, and 1000 subsequent accesses to the archived presentation. The invitation received from the MPS stated that this was "exactly the audience that matters" and "you [Harding] can have such a positive effect on shaping the way officers think about how they investigate gang and violent crime as well those critical key indicators to be aware of". The organiser said that feedback from attendees was "overwhelmingly positive" and invited Harding to follow-up meetings with senior MPS officers. [S6]

At the invitation of the National Police Chief's Council Knife Crime Lead, he presented his research findings at the March 2019 launch of Operation Sceptre (the week-long targeted approach on tackling knife crime across all 44 forces in England and Wales). That same month Harding also delivered training to over 100 staff at the Independent Office for Police Conduct on gang evolution and county lines; to Northamptonshire Constabulary on county lines drug supply networks and gangs; and in September 2020 to a West Midlands police event on Organised Exploitation. [S7]

Harding contributed extensively to the Review of the Metropolitan Police Service Gangs Matrix, from 2018-2020 as the only criminologist on the 11-person London Mayors Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) Reference Group. The resulting published report - *Review of the Metropolitan Police Service Gangs Matrix* (MOPAC, December 2018) - received national media interest and resulted in new MPS operating policy, improved MOPAC oversight, and substantial operational revisions and alterations. As invited reviewer, Harding raised issues of benchmarking, community engagement, standardisation, transparency, ownership, partnership and data-sharing – all later cited as final report recommendations (pp 65-73). These recommendations by Harding and others ensured the removal of over 1,000 young black men from the MPS Gangs Matrix by January 2021.

Harding has subsequently been engaged to advise MOPAC, joining their Expert Advisory Group for the Strategic Assessment for London's Policing & Crime in August 2020 and their Violence Reduction Unit's newly formed Research Advisory Group in September 2020. [S7]

Supporting local practitioner activity

Harding's findings have also influenced the intervention models adopted by individual organisations working on the ground in some of the districts most heavily affected by gang crime. For instance, Resilience Unlimited, which provides front-line support for young people at risk of harm from gang and youth violence, directly references Harding's work on its website. Its Director commented that Harding's research has underpinned the organisation's programme of working with vulnerable young people, adding: "Harding's recommendations regarding the need for improved data capture, joined up strategic leadership, and a re-invigorated community safety approach to the issues exposed by county lines drugs gangs have informed our company's corporate strategy and latest operational direction." [S8]

Further impact has been achieved through Harding's work to encourage partnership at a local level across education, local government, health, social care and third sector organisations. For instance, in September 2019 he trained Derbyshire practitioners and stakeholders on how to address county lines at a county-wide conference jointly organised by the Police and Crime Commissioner and Chief Constable. This led to Harding continuing to advise Derbyshire Safeguarding practitioners on indicative signs to look for in county lines; the role of girls; missing children; the role of social media; drill music; and partnership solutions.

In east London, his work has helped agencies in several boroughs, which grapple with high levels of youth violence to develop their approach. He was a keynote speaker on County Lines at the East BCU [Basic Command Unit] Summit in February 2020, which drew 220 representatives from the police, schools, charities and public agencies along with parents and politicians from the boroughs of Barking and Dagenham, Redbridge and Havering. Following the event, the Barking and Dagenham Cabinet Member for Community Safety and Enforcement wrote on her website that many people had fed back to her “how enlightening the Professor’s talk was and how much learning was gained for everyone”. This includes increased early intervention within schools, an increased focus on the role of young women and decreasing exclusions.

In neighbouring Newham, Harding advised the Council’s Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Commission review of Street Violence in 2018/19 through a series of meetings to help develop their local policy. In north Kent, Harding advised the Medway Community Safety Partnership which led to the adoption of his recommendations of a localised Gangs Taskforce. [S9]. In December 2020, an east London borough council commissioned the National Centre for Gang Research to report on “Serious Violence, Criminality and Drugs”, after hearing Harding present at a conference.

Public understanding of county lines

Harding’s research findings are widely reported by national/local media with 69 live UK TV broadcasts; 23 UK TV recorded broadcasts; 65 UK National press interviews; 8 international media interviews; syndicated coverage on 22 BBC radio stations - each expanding public understanding and debate on the scale and significance of ‘county lines’, the roles of young people and especially young women, new weapons such as acid attacks and the importance of partnership working.

For instance, his argument that financial cuts to youth services and to police community support officers were contributing to an increase in knife crime, was reported by the Guardian in April 2018. Harding was quoted as saying “Cuts to youth services mean young people no longer have premises on their immediate doorstep that they can go to, and between the reductions in policing and community safety, there is not a lot of partnership work or community engagement taking place”.

Recently, alongside the publication of R1 during the COVID-19 lockdown (May 2020), Harding was able to show how county lines gangs were adapting to the lockdown by finding new ways of doing business with some dealers dressing as joggers and creating fake NHS ID badges to move around freely. These findings were reported widely in national and regional press and broadcast news (e.g., Guardian; London Evening Standard; Sky News – all 7th May 2020). Harding’s County Lines monograph was featured in an article in The Times (26th May 2020) which highlighted the finding that gangs increasingly mimicked marketing techniques of legitimate businesses. [S10]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- S1. House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, Oral evidence: Serious violence, HC 1016 Tuesday 19 March 2019.
- S2. House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, Serious youth violence, Sixteenth Report of Session 2017–19 (HC1016, July 2019).
- S3. Serious Youth Violence: Government Response to the Committee’s Sixteenth Report of Session 2017–2019.
- S4. Queen’s Speech, Dec. 2019, Background Briefing Note (Prime Minister’s Office, 19/12/19)
- S5. Consolidated folder of invitations and responses from government departments
- S6. Consolidated folder of emails, MPS CPD event December 2020
- S7. Consolidated folder of invitations and responses from police and policing agencies
- S8. Email from Director, Resilience Unlimited, 22/6/20; and <https://resilienceprogramme.co.uk/>
- S9. Consolidated folder of invitations, material and feedback from local partnerships, and on the East BCU Summit see <https://margaretmullane.co.uk/node/41>
- S10. Consolidated folder of media reports