

County Lines and the power of the badge: the LFC Foundation's approach to youth intervention

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore the purpose and outline the key features of Liverpool Football Club Foundation's County Lines (CL) programme and how principles of collaboration and co-production can be implemented to educate children at risk of entering the youth justice system.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reviews the findings from a 12-week CL intervention programme in 14 secondary schools in the Liverpool City Region between 2021 and 2022. The programme was designed in collaboration with funders, partners and participants and aimed to improve knowledge of, and change attitudes towards CL and its associated harms, including knife crime and child exploitation.

Findings – Knowledge and attitude changes were measured across 12 indicators, with positive changes recorded for each indicator. Perhaps of most interest to those working in the sector was the recorded success in obtaining consistent attendance from beginning to end with very little erosion of engagement. This suggests that the content and method of delivery was successful in engaging harder to reach young people to make positive change.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first of its kind to examine how collaboration and co-production (two of the five principles of the Serious Violence Strategy 2018) can be implemented by a football charity and its partners to educate children in a local community on the harms of CL.

Keywords Child exploitation, Knife crime, Violence, Social action, Voluntary sector, Secondary schools, Intervention, Marginalisation, Education, Participation, Child first

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

County Lines (CL) is a model of illicit drug supply which sees the migration of (predominantly Class A) drugs and weapons over a county border. Facilitated through the use of mobile phones and incumbent on the exploitation of children and vulnerable people (Coomber and Moyle, 2017; Robinson *et al.*, 2018), CL is a national issue which has grown in prominence since 2015. Standing as the second highest exporter of drugs (NCA, 2017), Merseyside is no exception to this issue. Previously working together to tackle serious and organised crime, Liverpool Football Club Foundation (LFCF) has enjoyed continued collaborative work with Merseyside Police which has, in more recent years, focused on addressing CL issues. In 2019, Merseyside Police benefited from Government funding and, soon after, "Project Medusa" was created to target both internal and external CL within the County. A key strand of Project Medusa was its emphasis on partnership working with charities such as LFCF. This has boasted numerous measurable successes including the closure of over 500 CL, the prosecution of over 600 offenders, the safeguarding of over 800 children and vulnerable adults, the seizure of illicit weapons and drugs and upwards of

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£1.5m cash. According to Merseyside Police, Project Medusa has reduced CL emanating from Merseyside by over 50%.

Increased identification of CL has seen a yearly increase in the number of recorded cases nationally, with an average of over 500 children referred into the National Referral Mechanism [1] each quarter of 2021 (HM Government, 2022). Simultaneously, the academic literature base has expanded with scholars focusing on the inner mechanisms of CL, its impact on communities and the harms experienced by its actors (including girls and women) (Bavington, 2021; Havard *et al.*, 2021; Holligan *et al.*, 2020; Robinson *et al.*, 2018; Windle *et al.*, 2020). There is also a limited but emerging knowledge base documenting what works in addressing CL, including the effectiveness of policy and practice responses (Blakeburn and Smith, 2021; Harding, 2020; Spicer, 2018). However, deficiencies arise when assessing the effectiveness of programmes developed to reduce CL and the associated exploitation, and it is this gap which has encouraged the development of this paper. Therefore, remaining sections of this article attempt to address this deficiency by documenting the LFCF's CL Programme and how principles of collaboration and co-production can be implemented to educate children at risk of entering the youth justice system, particularly for CL-related offences.

Literature review

Merseyside, deprivation and violence

Merseyside is a metropolitan county situated in the North West of England. The county comprises five boroughs (Liverpool, Knowsley, St Helens, Sefton and Wirral) which together share a population of 1.38 million. Inequality and social exclusion have impacted upon the majority of the five boroughs that comprise Merseyside, and, like many other urban areas (Ellis, 2015), Merseyside has suffered from de-industrialisation, deprivation and poverty with long-standing and deep-rooted issues of generational unemployment. With its large port and subsequent employment opportunities, Liverpool was once thriving in manufacturing and was, in 1970, the “largest exporting port in the British Commonwealth” (Sykes *et al.*, 2013, p. 1). During the 1980s, Britain's industrial base shrank by 20% (Pitts, 2008), and the success was not to remain. Compared to the rest of Britain, Merseyside disproportionately lost industry and service jobs and, as a result, the County sank into sharp decline with some of the highest unemployment rates in the UK. A decade ago, the think-tank *Centre for Cities* identified Liverpool as having some of the worst problems with regards to economic, demographic and social markers (Centre for Cities, 2012, as cited in Sykes *et al.*, 2013). Indeed in 2012, 70% of the city's 33 regions were within the 10% most deprived in England and Wales with “healthy life expectancy” fluctuating by up to 30 years between the city's wealthiest and poorest areas (Sykes *et al.*, 2013). The reality of this discrepancy sees children and young people in these areas disproportionately raised in poverty. Indeed, rough estimates indicate that around 30% of children in Liverpool were living in poverty at the end of 2017 (Phelan *et al.*, 2018). Not only does this contribute to poorer health outcomes, decreased academic achievement and lower aspiration but can also lead to greater exposure to anti-social behaviour (ASB), violence and substance misuse.

Economic struggles aside, Merseyside has previously been identified as one of the worst areas in the country for gang affiliation (HM Government, 2013). Although accurate figures about the extent of the problem of gangs in Merseyside are not known, a decade ago the Tackling Gangs Action Programme (Dawson, 2008) noted that there were more gangs in the county ($N = 96$) than in the more highly populated, Greater Manchester ($N = 76$). Of course, this needs to be interpreted with care as government figures combined with definitional sensitivity create a nebulous and often sensationalist picture of gangs. According to the Liverpool Echo (Merseyside's daily newspaper), there were 89 shootings in Merseyside between April 2016 and April 2017, a rise of almost 50% on the previous year. This mirrored an increase in police-recorded violence in Merseyside during the same

12 months. Whilst it is currently unknown how many of these incidences can be attributed to gang involvement, among the shootings were nine fatalities, many of whom included children.

Child criminal exploitation and County Lines

CL can be described as “drug dealing with vulnerability and exploitation in the business model”. For young males in Merseyside, participation in illicit drug markets has filled many of the employment gaps left in the wake of de-industrialisation. In a 2019 exploration of “Gangs, Child Criminal Exploitation and County Lines” in Merseyside, [Robinson \(2019\)](#) noted that a number of gang-associated young people had diversified from involvement in local drug supply to working CL ([Robinson et al., 2018](#)), which saw those with “deviant entrepreneurial traits” ([Hesketh, 2018](#)) travelling to areas such as Cheshire, Cumbria, Wales and Scotland in the pursuit of alternative drug markets and increased profit margins. The increasing evolution of young males involved with street “gangs” or, termed by [Hesketh \(2018\)](#), “Deviant Street Groups” to well-established drug supply markets is often tantamount to the philosophy of “grafting”, something once descriptive of arduous blue-collar work, now co-opted to be indicative of several forms of criminality and in particular drug dealing. As noted by [Hesketh and Robinson \(2019\)](#), grafting has become the marker in which individuals may neutralise and morally dissuade feelings and/or the outward perception of complicity. While criminal exploitation has been a long-standing characteristic of these subterranean criminal environments, the growth of CL has exacerbated the severity of these incidents where children and vulnerable adults are increasingly placed into dangerous and harmful situations by those who they perceive to be in positions of power. Such a phenomenon has become widely recognised as child criminal exploitation (CCE).

Adolescents and children at risk of exploitation present significant challenges for professionals, both in law enforcement and child protection agencies. The complexity of issues surrounding exploitation is often beleaguered by misunderstanding, black and white approaches and polarised thinking, which often serve to compound tensions between communities and benevolent services. All too often, the impulse to punish surpasses the need to engage individuals in welfare, protection and rehabilitation. That Anne Longfield, in 2019, attributed the next major “grooming scandal” ([Children's Commissioner, 2019](#)) to CCE speaks to the necessity in which government bodies must facilitate actionable measures as national urgency. Despite the concerns of practitioners versed in the insidious nature of CCE, the absence of an evidence base on “what works” in addressing the issue pales in comparison to the alarming misunderstanding emerging from services directed to assist. Unfortunately, the speed in which research is assimilated is surpassed by the experiences of those benefiting from its increasing development. There is, surprisingly, no formal definition of CCE; however, practitioners universally agree that it involves the coercion, control, manipulation and force of a child or young person into criminal activity, by any individual or group, by almost always those practised in exploiting existing vulnerabilities ([Harding, 2020](#); [Kenway, 2021](#); [Spicer et al., 2019](#); [Windle et al., 2020](#)). The National Crime Agency ([NCA, 2016, 2017, 2019](#)) posit a significant growth of CCE throughout the UK, with CL cited as the most prevalent form. Violence and disorder are inextricably linked to CL and synonymous with the accounts of victims across a wide spectrum, where reports of violence, sexual exploitation, extreme control, deprivation of liberty and psychological abuse abound.

Addressing County Lines

Though illicit drugs have been trafficked across county borders for decades, the labelling of this process as “County Lines” first appeared in 2015 in an NCA Intelligence Assessment ([NCA, 2015](#)). The rationale for increased law enforcement action was based upon this “emerging” activity involving the “exploitation of vulnerable persons [...] involv[ing] both

children and adults who require safeguarding” (NCA, 2015, p. 1). Successive intelligence assessments and briefing reports produced by the NCA centred around CL and its intersection with “Gang Violence” and “Exploitation” (NCA, 2016), “Violence” and “Exploitation” (NCA, 2017) and “Vulnerability and Harm” (NCA, 2019). In the Government’s 2016 Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation Programme, support was offered to local authorities in improving the way that they responded to gang and youth violence (Andell, 2019), CL remaining at the centre of these considerations.

In April 2018, the Conservative Government launched their Serious Violence Strategy in response to “an increase in knife crime, gun crime and homicides in England”. Tackling CL was one of the four main themes (HM Government, 2019a) included in the strategy, which saw investment in Violence Reduction Units in the areas most affected by violent crime, the inception of the County Lines National Coordination Centre and a channelling of £200m into the Youth Endowment Fund – an “independent charitable trust” implemented in March 2019 (Impetus, 2022). Alongside this was a catalyst for increased multi-agency working to prevent and tackle serious violence and more specifically, a “5Cs” approach to serious violence prevention, including cooperation in data and intelligence sharing, counter-narrative development, community consensus and, of relevance to this article, collaboration and co-production. Collaboration sees partners from a wide variety of sectors working together to implement the shared goal of tackling and preventing violence. Co-production – in which communities are involved in creating plans and strategies to address a given issue – works to establish and maintain community engagement, supporting the “idea of consensus and shared accountability” (HM Government, 2019b, p. 28).

Methodology

Liverpool Football Club Foundation background/mission

The LFCF is the official charity of Liverpool Football Club (LFC). Working in areas of high need and deprivation across the Liverpool City Region (LCR), the LFCF aims to deliver sustainable and long-term change for communities and to ensure that this work continues to benefit future generations.

The LFCF delivers a broad range of programmes aligned to specific outcomes, across six key impact areas: Sport and Physical Activity, Health and Wellbeing, Education and Life Skills, Employment and Life Skills, Community Engagement and Youth Interventions. This paper focuses on the latter impact area and outlines why the LFCF approach to youth intervention is both novel and successful in engaging harder to reach young people.

One programme within the Youth Interventions impact area is the LFCF’s CL Programme. This programme supports young people within secondary schools via an engaging curriculum that aims to both motivate young people and raise their aspirations to succeed in life. The programme provides a safe space for all and encourages young people to take ownership of their behaviour inside and outside of education. Ultimately, the curriculum aims to help steer young people away from negative behaviours, negative peer groups and influences and supports them to become positive role models within their communities.

Design

The LFCF delivers various levels of youth interventions; from core programmes such as “County Lines”, “Onside”, “Premier League Inspires” and “Premier League Kicks Targeted” which are targeted provision in schools, through to intensification days and one-off events working with partners.

The core CL programme is delivered for one hour per week for 12 weeks. The programme covers topics such as what CL is and its impact on individuals, families and communities. It also includes aspects of mental health, court and prison life, employment and future

aspirations and, through partnership working with KnifeSavers [2], the programme also educates young people on bleeding control and the dangers of using weapons.

In addition, the CL programme supports educational sites with workshops, assemblies and collapsed curriculum days to support more students in schools. Delivery focuses on education topics such as peer pressure, importance of communication and relationships alongside the power to say no. This is a new and novel programme and the first of its kind in Merseyside.

Participants deemed to be “at risk” or vulnerable to child exploitation are identified and invited to participate in the programme through their respective leads within educational settings. Using the adverse childhood experience criteria, factors such as student attendance, behaviour and attitudes – alongside intelligence gained from Merseyside Police highlighting young people’s involvement in gangs or ASB – are considered in the referral/inclusion criteria.

When identified, respective participants’ parents, carers or guardians complete a consent form enabling students to engage with the sessions. The form outlines the curriculum content stipulating why the young person has been identified. Participation in the programme is voluntary; if students want to withdraw at any time, they can remove themselves from the programme. Without consent, young people cannot participate in the programme.

Data collection

Registration data was collected prior to the start of the programme, including key demographic information. Monitoring data was collected throughout the programme, including attendance in sessions.

All data is collected in line with LFCF governance policies and procedures as outlined in the organisation’s privacy policy (LFC, 2022). Ethical consideration of all aspects of the programme including design and data collection was discussed and agreed with key stakeholders including LFCF’s Senior Leadership Team, Merseyside Police, participating schools and from insights gained via feedback from previous CL cohorts.

A paper-based questionnaire was distributed to all students in Week 1 of the intervention. This questionnaire focused on obtaining baseline data on knowledge, confidence and attitudes towards key topics that were covered in the educational intervention. This same questionnaire was also distributed in Week 12 of the intervention to assess learning and attitude change from baseline. All questionnaires were administered by LFCF staff, and responses were manually inputted to data monitoring systems for analysis.

The questionnaire was completed anonymously by participants, and this was requested by participants to alleviate anxieties around identifiable responses and who these would be shared with, for example the school and/or police. This method allowed participants to be more honest in their answers. Questionnaire completion was voluntary; thus, not all participants completed the questionnaire.

Findings

As outlined above, the LFCF has an array of CL initiatives. This report focuses on the core intervention programme which is typically delivered face-to-face in secondary schools.

From the beginning of 2021 to the end of March 2022, a total of 826 students within the LCR have attended the programme. These were from 14 secondary schools; therefore, participants were of secondary school age, with a slightly higher male population accessing the programme (56%).

A total of 423 sessions were delivered with 4,356 attendees (average 10.3 sessions attended per person).

This paper focuses on data capture from provision between October 2021 to March 2022. In total, 237 students participated in the programme, and a sample of these agreed to complete the pre- and post-data questionnaire.

Questionnaire responses

Due to the voluntary nature of the questionnaire completion, not all students who participated in the intervention completed a pre- or post-questionnaire return. Thus, findings are based on a sample of the cohort.

Responses:

- Baseline questionnaires $N = 73$ (30.8% response rate); and
- Post-intervention questionnaires $N = 61$ (25.7% response rate).

Where participants were asked to rate something, for example their knowledge or confidence, a 10-point Likert-style scale was used. The scale extremes are listed in [Table 1](#) and repeated throughout this section where needed to aid understanding.

1. County Lines. Participants were asked to rate their knowledge of CL pre- and post-intervention on a 10-point Likert-style scale, with 1 indicating “No knowledge” and 10 indicating “Excellent knowledge”. Average scores increased from 4.2 (SD = 2.24) pre-intervention to 8.3 (SD = 1.63) post-intervention (average increase of 4.2 points on the Likert-style scale), indicating an improvement in knowledge from baseline.

When participants were asked “What do you think CL means?” narrative data from baseline questionnaires demonstrated limited insight and one-word answers compared to post-intervention data collection ([Figure 1](#)).

Participants shared their perspectives on what they think CL means ([Figure 2](#)). Participants were also asked what they thought the short-term and long-term effects of being involved in CL were. Again, responses indicated more insight post-intervention ([Figure 3](#)).

Participants were also asked how confident they were in identifying someone involved in CL. Average scores increased from 3.6 (SD = 2.38) pre-intervention to 8.2 (SD = 1.99) post-intervention (average increase by 4.6 points on the 10-point Likert-style scale), indicating an improvement in confidence from baseline.

Finally, participants were asked to rate how confident they felt in accessing advice and support regarding CL if they needed to. Average scores increased from 3.9 (SD = 2.74) pre-intervention to 8.2 (SD = 2.20) post-intervention (average increase by 4.3 points on the 10-point Likert-style scale), indicating an improvement in confidence from baseline.

2. Knife injury. Participants were asked to rate their knowledge of dealing with a knife injury if they needed to. On a 10-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating “No knowledge” and 10 indicating “Excellent knowledge”, average scores increased from 4.3 (SD = 2.0) pre-intervention to 5.9 (SD = 1.80) post-intervention (average increase of 1.6 points on the Likert-style scale), indicating an improvement in knowledge from baseline.

Participants were also asked to rate their confidence in performing first aid on somebody who had suffered a knife injury. Again, average scores rose from 4.2 (SD = 2.28) pre-intervention to 6.3 (SD = 1.91) post-intervention, indicating an increase in confidence from baseline (average increase 2.1 points on the Likert-style scale).

3. Police. Participants were asked to rate how much they knew about their local police force (Merseyside Police). On the 10-point Likert-style scale, where 1 indicated “No knowledge” and 10 indicated “Excellent knowledge”, average scores increased from 6.3 (SD = 2.85)

Table 1 Summarised pre- and post-questionnaire data

	Question	Pre			Post			Difference
		Sample size	Average score	SD	Sample size	Average score	SD	
1	Rate how much you know about County Lines (Scale: 1 = No knowledge – 10 = Excellent knowledge)	73	4.2	2.24	61	8.3	1.63	↑4.1 Positive change from baseline
2	Rate how knowledgeable you are if you had to deal with a knife injury (Scale: 1 = No knowledge – 10 = Excellent knowledge)	69	4.3	2.0	61	5.9	1.80	↑1.6 Positive change from baseline
3	Rate your confidence to perform first aid on somebody who has suffered a knife injury (Scale: 1 = No knowledge – 10 = Excellent knowledge)	71	4.2	2.28	59	6.3	1.91	↑2.1 Positive change from baseline
4	How much do you know about Merseyside Police? (Scale: 1 = No confidence – 10 = Very confident)	72	6.3	2.85	60	7.5	2.41	↑1.2 Positive change from baseline
5	What is your perception of Merseyside Police? (Scale: 1 = Negative – 10 = Positive)	71	3.5	2.42	61	6.1	2.64	↑2.6 Positive change from baseline
6	How confident are you in identifying someone involved in County Lines?	70	3.6	2.38	60	8.2	1.99	↑4.6 Positive change from baseline
7	Do you know how to get advice/support regarding County Lines if you need to? (Scale: 1 = Not confident – 10 = Very confident)	71	3.9	2.74	61	8.2	2.20	↑4.3 Positive change from baseline
8	What do you know about social action? (Scale: 1 = Nothing – 10 = Loads)	68	2.4	1.93	58	4.4	2.54	↑2 Positive change from baseline
9	Do you feel empowered to take part in social action to make a difference in your local area? (Scale: 1 = No – 10 = Yes)	67	2.3	1.99	55	4.4	2.54	↑2.1 Positive change from baseline
10	How well I do at school would not make a difference to my life (Scale: 1 = Totally agree – 10 = Totally disagree)	55	6.1	3.16	50	7.6	2.43	↑1.5 Positive change from baseline
11	If I work, I can succeed in life (Scale: 1 = Totally disagree – 10 = Totally agree)	55	6.0	3.04	49	7.3	2.39	↑1.3 Positive change from baseline
12	Doing well at school is important to me (Scale: 1 = Totally disagree – 10 = Totally agree)	56	5.3	3.07	50	6.5	2.52	↑1.2 Positive change from baseline

Figure 1 Participants rating of their knowledge of CL pre and post the intervention

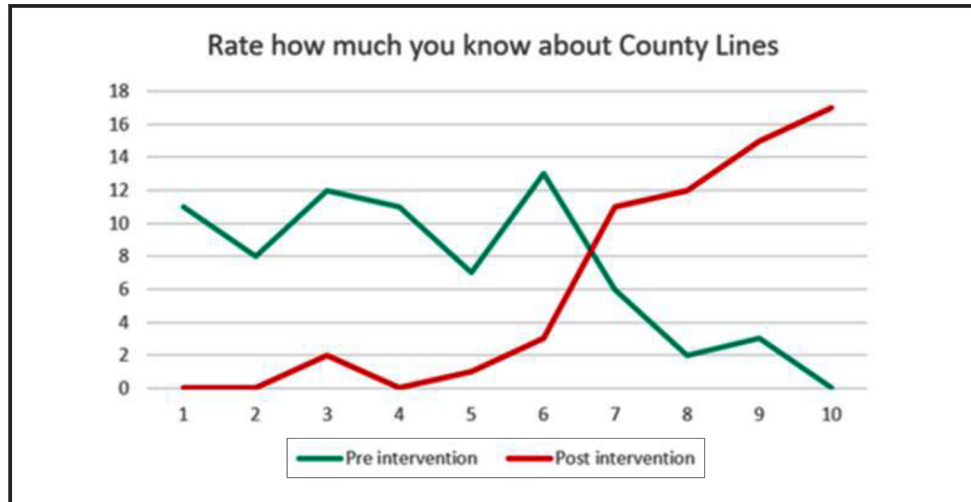


Figure 2 Participants narrative responses regarding their understanding of County Lines

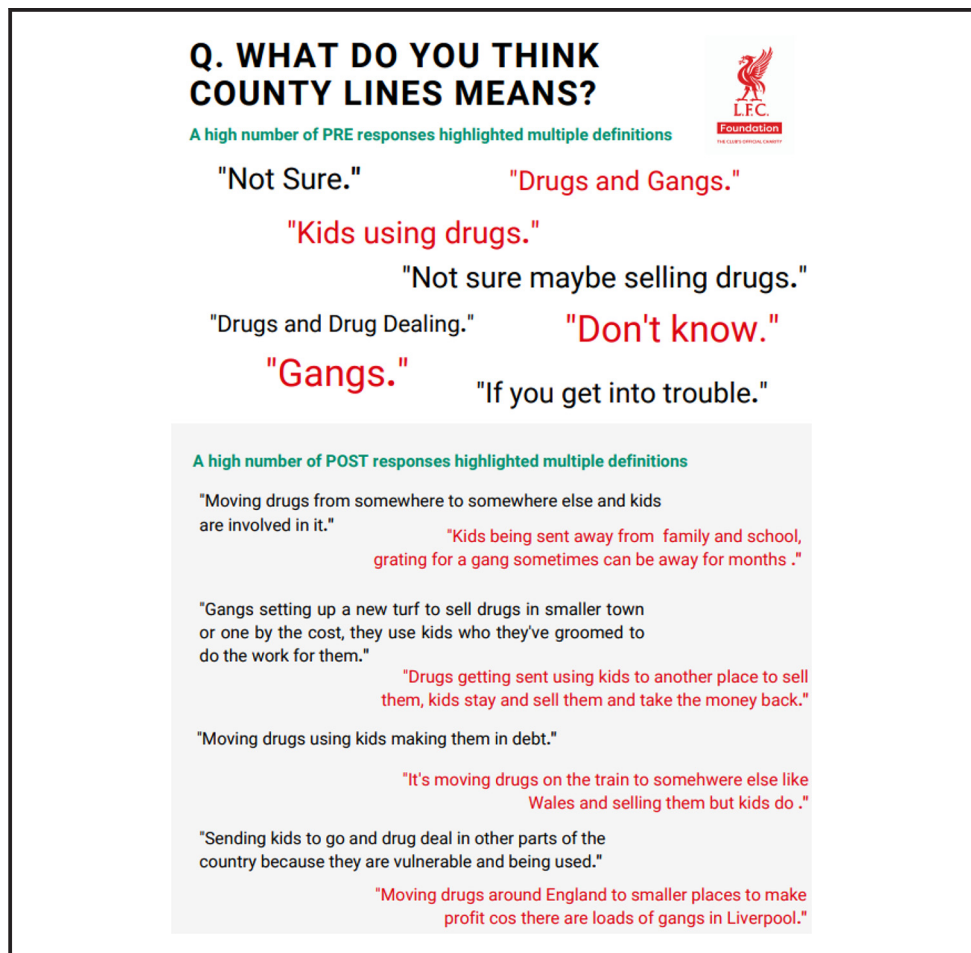
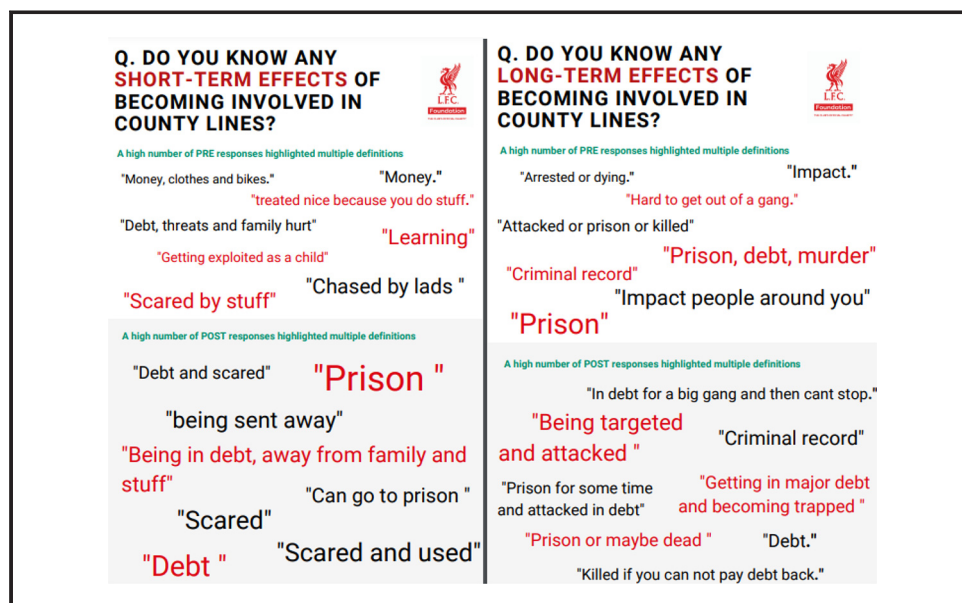


Figure 3 Participants narrative responses regarding their understanding of the short- and long-term effects of becoming involved in County Lines



pre-intervention to 7.5 (SD = 2.41) post-intervention (average increase of 1.2 points on the Likert-style scale), indicating both a high level of baseline knowledge and an improvement in knowledge from baseline.

Participants were also asked to rate their perception of Merseyside Police. Again, average scores rose from 3.5 (SD = 2.42) pre-intervention to 6.1 (SD = 2.64) post-intervention, indicating an increase in positive perception from baseline (average increase 2.6 points on the Likert-style scale).

4. Social action. Participants were asked to rate how much they knew about social action. Average scores increased from 2.4 (SD = 1.93) pre-intervention to 4.4 (SD = 2.54) post-intervention (average increase of 2 points on the Likert-style scale), indicating improvement in knowledge from baseline.

Participants were also asked to rate how empowered they felt to take part in social action to make a difference in their local areas. Again, average scores rose from 2.3 (SD = 1.99) pre-intervention to 4.4 (SD = 2.54) post-intervention, indicating an increase in personal empowerment from baseline (average increase 2.1 points on the Likert-style scale).

5. Importance of school. Participants were asked about their perceptions of school and work using questions from research into educational aspirations in inner-city schools (Strand and Winston, 2008). The first of the three questions in this area asked participants to rate the question "How well I do at school wont make a difference to my life" (1 = totally agree/10 = totally disagree). Average scores increased from 6.1 (SD = 3.16) pre-intervention to 7.6 (SD = 2.43) post-intervention (average increase of 1.5 points on the Likert-style scale), indicating both a high baseline score and an improvement from baseline.

Participants were also asked to rate the question "If I work, I can succeed in life". Again, average scores rose from 6.0 (SD = 3.04) pre-intervention to 7.3 (SD = 2.39) post-intervention. Finally, participants were asked to rate "Doing well at school is important to me". This also indicated both a relatively high baseline and a positive change from baseline (average pre 5.3 [SD = 3.07] to average post 6.5 [SD = 2.52]).

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the LFCF's approach to working with young people considered vulnerable, including those at risk of exploitation. The project aimed to gather and assess young people's attitudes towards CL activities with a view to improving knowledge and awareness to equip them with the ability to make informed choices. This paper has reviewed the findings from a 12-week CL intervention programme in 14 secondary schools in the LCR between 2021 and 2022. The programme was designed in collaboration with funders, partners and participants and aimed to improve knowledge of, and change attitudes towards CL and its associated harms, including knife crime and child exploitation.

Knowledge and attitude changes were measured across 12 indicators with positive changes recorded for each indicator. Perhaps of most interest to those working in the sector was the recorded success in obtaining consistent attendance from beginning to end with very little erosion of engagement. This suggests that the content and method of delivery was successful in engaging "harder to reach" young people to make positive change.

As presented in [Table 1](#), the key finding speaks to young people's understanding of what CL means (see [Figure 2](#)), whether and how they can identify if someone is involved in CL and how to access help and support when required. As [Table 1](#) also revealed, whilst a large number knew about the role/function of Merseyside Police, there was a marked positive improvement of young people's perceptions of Merseyside Police. Recent Vulnerability, Knowledge and Practice Programme research suggests that children and young people who have been subjected to violence and abuse "often report negative experiences with the police" ([Brown et al., 2022](#), p. 2), revealing that they do not feel heard and rarely have their needs met. This demonstrates the importance of strengthening relationships between young people and police to increase trust, confidence and – where necessary – engagement in the criminal justice system.

Furthermore, as also presented in [Table 1](#), young people's viewpoints on the importance and value of education improved, which may in turn see reduced absence from school. This is a welcomed improvement, as school exclusion instigates a vulnerability to gang violence, CL and CCE. Furthermore, experiences such as these from pupils in attendance of school have a direct and apposing correlation, with victims more likely to face exclusion as a result ([Just for Kids Law, 2020](#)).

Whilst young people may not necessarily respond well to those they perceive as being in positions of authority, they tended to view members of the LFCF team as a "trusted adult" and as "someone to talk to". Trust is also a prerequisite for enabling children's effective involvement in discussions with workers around their care needs ([Creaney, 2020](#)). Constructive child-practitioner relationships can help to facilitate engagement and transitions into positive outcomes, including promoting sustainable desistance (non-offending) ([Arthur et al., 2019](#); [Case et al., 2020](#)).

This paper has offered insight into how the LFCF engage young people at risk of involvement in CL, in accordance with two of the five key principles of the Serious Violence Strategy 2018, collaboration and co-production. This was, at least in part, achieved through "the power of the badge", which involved professionals being able to relate and connect with the young people, creating an environment that was conducive to learning and development. Young people were perceived as capable of engaging in collaborative partnerships and viewed as reliable when invited to co-create activities. Members of the LFCF team were cognisant of children's needs, and the importance of ensuring that approaches to practise is aligned to children's interests. They were also aware of the value of their unique contributions beyond the rhetoric that their perspectives are merely "taking into account" (and potentially ignored) ([Case et al., 2020](#)).

The football charity sector can play a vital role in promoting positive outcomes by embracing the spirit and ethos of the "Child First" strategy ([YJB, 2021](#) [Burns and Creaney, 2023](#);

[Day, 2022](#)). This involves ensuring interventions are in the child's best interests, constructive (e.g. promoting children's strengths and capacities), non-criminalising (e.g. pre-emptive prevention, prioritising diversion and enabling young people to access leisure and social activities) and, crucially, collaborative (e.g. promoting children's meaningful participation in service design) ([Creaney and Case, 2021](#); [YJB, 2021](#); Peer Power/[YJB, 2021](#), p. 70). The work undertaken by the football charity sector can be related to addressing unmet needs, which often includes promoting healthy development or providing educative support (see LFC Foundation 2021/22 impact report). This paper has offered insights into how the football charity sector can respond to CL, including the importance of connecting with young people to facilitate opportunities for them to participate in pro-social activities.

Limitations

It is acknowledged that there are limitations to this research. Such limitations may include the sample size, the voluntary nature of questionnaire completion and the reduced numbers completing the post-questionnaire compared with the baseline questionnaire. It was a conscious decision for the questionnaire to be anonymous – to encourage more honest responses – as such we cannot be certain if the responses are reflective of the larger cohort and are also unable to ascertain the reasons why participants may have completed the pre-questionnaire and not the post-questionnaire.

Linked to this, there were a relatively high number of participants who felt that doing well at school was important for them, this may be indicative that some participants answering the questionnaire were less vulnerable and “at risk” compared to others who may not have completed the questionnaire or participated in the intervention. Further research could include a follow-up focus group with the cohorts to obtain more detail around questionnaire completions. In addition, the questionnaire was designed to measure relevant aspects of the programme; thus, validity and reliability of the questionnaire and individual indicators have not been subject to statistical rigour.

Recommendations

- Focus on raising aspirations by providing a platform for young people to connect with others and build relationships based on mutual trust and respect;
- develop opportunities to deliver key interventions through partner organisations who have positive relationships with schools and communities;
- encourage young people to “think through” the difficulties or challenges they are experiencing in life and to communicate their needs, interests, concerns or express their views in a comfortable child-friendly and person-centred format;
- provide space to those in receipt of interventions to talk candidly and without constraint about their perspectives or viewpoints on matters; and
- support young people to become positive role models within their communities.

Notes

- 1 The National Referral Mechanism is the UK's framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery. Specified “First Responders” can make referrals for potential victims, including police, NCA, local authorities and select non-governmental organisations.
- 2 Developed by doctors at the Major Trauma Centre at Aintree University Hospital in Liverpool, [KnifeSavers \(2022\)](#) is an educational programme which teaches individuals how to deal with injuries caused by knife crime.

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Dr Paula Carroll has a PhD from the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Medicine, Edge Hill University and is a Teaching Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Paula worked for 17 years in secure settings in the National Health Service undertaking public health and research roles. Subsequently, Paula's main research areas are physical/mental health and clinical education in secure mental health settings. Her PhD project was titled "Student mental health nurse (SMHN) communication: responding to emotion, patient and student nurse satisfaction". Paula's current role as Insights and Impact Department Manager for the LFC Foundation has allowed her to develop further research interests nationally and internationally focusing on the impact of sports charities on inequalities, deprivation and children and young people. Research also extends to "the power of the LFC badge" in engaging harder to reach communities in positive interventions.

Dr Grace Robinson is the Founder and CEO of Black Box Research and Consultancy; a nationwide criminal justice consultancy specialising in Modern Slavery (forced labour, criminal exploitation and County Lines drug supply). Having completed her PhD on Urban Street Gangs, Child Criminal Exploitation and County Lines, Grace has since has worked on over 250 modern slavery cases as an Expert Witness – providing her expertise to the criminal courts and assisting in asylum tribunals – comprising drugs and weapon offences, fraud, burglary and robbery. Grace previously worked within the University of Nottingham's "Rights Lab", where she led on projects: (1) exploring the impact of COVID-19 on County Lines and (2) examining the intersection between cognitive impairment and exploitation. Grace continues to spread awareness of criminal exploitation by delivering training and participating in podcasts, radio interviews and documentaries. In 2022, she consulted with members of the House of Lords on the Nationality and Borders Bill.

Dr Sean Creaney is a Criminologist and Senior Lecturer in the School of Law, Criminology and Policing at Edge Hill University. His areas of knowledge and expertise include Child First Justice, typologies, theories and models of participation and co-production and experiential peer support and mentorship. Sean is a founding Advisory Board member of social justice charity Peer Power, an empathy-led charity focussed on healing trauma and creating individual and system change. In 2021, Sean was a research consultant on a Youth Justice Board commissioned project that audited and explored the practice of participatory approaches and co-creation across youth justice services. Sean is a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of the Safer Communities journal and was awarded Outstanding Paper in both the 2015 and 2021 Emerald Literati Network Awards for Excellence. Sean Creaney is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: sean.creaney@edgehill.ac.uk

D/Supt Andrew O'Connor has 29 years of Police experience within Merseyside Police and has been fortunate to serve as a Detective at every rank up to his current rank of Detective Superintendent. Having joined in 1993, in 1994, he went on a CID attachment and never put a uniform on again until 2019 when he became the Force lead for Preventive Policing. For the past 12 years, he has been involved primarily in tackling all levels of Serious and Organised Crime Groups who impact upon Merseyside and throughout the UK. Liverpool OCG's have a footprint in most of the 43 UK Police Forces. He has worked in both overt and covert investigations and in 2017 became Merseyside and Cheshire's Serious and Organised Crime Community Coordinator working with the Home Office to help develop SOC Prevent programmes. This work started with both Liverpool and Everton Football clubs to develop diversionary programmes to deter young and vulnerable people away from SOC using sport as a lever to gain the interest of those most susceptible to exploitation and gang affiliation. Their work aims to keep young people in education, take up vocational training leading onto employment opportunities. They now have over 50 partner agencies working on their SOC/County Lines Prevent programmes. He became Force Lead for County Lines in 2019, developing and leading Project Medusa, tackling County Lines emanating from Merseyside impacting on UK Police Forces. He now has responsibility for all crime intelligence for Merseyside with the Force Intelligence Bureau.

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