



# The variable and evolving nature of ‘cuckooing’ as a form of criminal exploitation in street level drug markets

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## Abstract

A form of criminal exploitation rarely mentioned in the academic literature has recently emerged, evolved and taken meaningful hold in the UK. Hundreds of cases of ‘cuckooing’ have been reported, where heroin and crack cocaine dealers associated with the so-called ‘County Lines’ supply methodology have taken over the homes of local residents and created outposts to facilitate their supply operations in satellite locations. Dominant narratives surrounding this practice have stressed its exploitative nature and the vulnerabilities of those involved. Combining qualitative data from two studies, this paper critically analyses the model of cuckooing and the experiences of those affected. In turn it explores the impact of County Lines on affected areas and local populations, a topic that has received little academic scrutiny. Four typologies of cuckooing are constructed, highlighting its variance and complexity. Findings also suggest it to be a growing method of criminal exploitation beyond drug supply with a possible burgeoning presence being realised internationally.

**Keywords** Cuckooing · Drug supply · Drug markets · Exploitation · Violence

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## Introduction

In February 2018, Essex Police (2018) reported on a case in the town of Basildon, 26 miles east of London, where two drug dealers from inner city London received prison sentences having taking over a local resident's home. Described as a vulnerable woman in her 40s living with a young child, the resident was reportedly living in fear while her home was used as a base for supplying heroin and crack in the local area. Such cases are now seemingly commonplace and have been labelled as 'cuckooing', a term signifying an unwelcome or unwanted intruder after the nest invading tendencies of cuckoo birds. The precise origin of this term is not identifiable. There appears to be some historical precedent (Buerger 1992), but it remained a forgotten and underutilised concept until recently becoming popularised among practitioner circles (Butera 2013; Doward 2010). Its prominence and the associated awareness of such cases over recent years has now ensured that 'cuckooing' is beginning to hold a distinct space among the terms that comprise the formal and informal drug-market 'lexicon' (Linneman 2016).

As a practice in recent years, cuckooing has become inextricably allied with the burgeoning but nonetheless already extensive drug supply model known within the UK as 'County Lines' (see Coomber and Moyle 2018). Driven, at least in part, by the relative saturation of heroin and crack markets in England's major cities (Windle and Briggs 2015) drug supply networks have been found increasingly setting up retail operations in smaller satellite towns, often far from their native urban hubs (Andell and Pitts 2018; Robinson et al. 2018; Spicer 2018). Whilst recognising the long history of drug dealers moving from major urban conurbations to provincial areas (Dorn et al. 1992), and arguments that incipient forms of the practice have been taking place longer than recently portrayed by law enforcement and the media (e.g. Daly 2018), the prominence of the County Lines model marks a distinct evolution in the markets for heroin and crack cocaine. Rather than 'out of town' dealers operating at the wholesale level (Matrix Knowledge Group 2007; Pearson and Hobbs 2001), they are now establishing retail operations in targeted areas, frequently interacting with local customers and having a sustained presence at street level (Coomber and Moyle 2018).

It seems precisely this itinerant feature of the County Lines supply model that has led to it being associated with a host of significant harms. More frequent and serious drug market violence, and the involvement of children and young people (Windle and Briggs 2015), has caused significant concern, to spread beyond the awareness of law enforcement and other practitioners into the wider political and public spheres (see e.g. APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults 2017). Of particular note for the purposes of this article, however, is the exploitation of local populations in 'host' drug markets, as it is here that the issue of cuckooing is located. With regard to urban dealers becoming mobile and 'going country', Coomber and Moyle (2018) note that there is something of a mixed economy of approaches. Some 'commute', making day trips to deal in satellite locations. Others could be described as 'holidayers', staying in the local area for one, two or just a number of short-stay nights to increase their available selling time. However, dealers moving into a foreign locale with the intention of establishing a sustained presence inevitably require more prolonged access to residences. At the most fundamental level they need somewhere to rest, but given their trade, also somewhere

to stash, package and sometimes directly retail drugs as well as shield themselves from the gaze of law enforcement (Spicer 2018).

Under these conditions frequent cases of cuckooing appear to have emerged and proliferated, with urban dealers attempting to establish more provincial bases. It has been suggested that this is typically accomplished by targeting those described as ‘vulnerable’ (Coliandris 2015). Those reported as having had their homes appropriated by such dealers include those with drug dependency, disabilities, mental health issues and the elderly (NCA 2016). The propensity for these situations to involve threats, violence and other forms of exploitation means that it is considered a serious problem requiring significant attention (NCA 2017). Until now it has been the focus of little academic or critical enquiry. As such, there is a need to examine the experiences of those affected and analyse the very concept of cuckooing itself. As with many prominent aspects of organised crime (see Antonopoulos 2015), it is also important to interrogate dominant discourses that swirl around and become perpetuated by the sheer amount of attention the issue of County Lines has received (Robinson et al. 2018). Taking up this task in relation to cuckooing, we draw on a range of cases and detailed examples to identify its nuances and differential nature, bringing to light experiences of victimisation within drug markets (Windle and Silke 2019). In so doing, practices are also identified that do not conform to the prevailing narratives or involve County Lines at all. We consider the extent to which cuckooing - previously only referred to scarcely as a specific form of criminal exploitation - can be considered a new (in the sense that it is not recognised as a consolidated and established approach or form elsewhere), evolving and growing form of crime model that, along with the County Lines drug supply methodology, has potentially very significant international ramifications.

## Literature review

### Criminal exploitation

Analysing the techniques used to minimise law enforcement attention by those involved in retail drug supply in the US, Buerger (1992: 40) dubbed one approach the ‘Cuckoo’s Nest’. While sometimes achieved by appropriating an abandoned property, it was also often the result of more exploitative methods. Homes were reported as having been taken over in the occupant’s absence, or if present they were threatened to allow their place of residence to be used for supply. Exploitation in various guises has of course been a staple tool of both organised and more general criminality (Hobbs 2013; Murray 2006). Typically, although not exclusively used for instrumental purposes (see Copes et al. 2015), manipulating and abusing others to achieve specific aims has been found across a range of settings including forced labour (Lewis and Dwyer 2014), human trafficking (Davidson 2010), and online sexual exploitation (Henry and Powell 2016). Perhaps somewhat inevitably, however, those that present as suitable targets for exploitative criminal practices often have clear susceptibilities which are explicitly taken advantage of (Chakraborti and Garland 2012). Many of the most vulnerable, but also most hidden, are therefore exposed to ruthless exploitation, resulting in significant personal and societal costs (Villacampa and Torres 2017).

Further examples of how criminal exploitation manifests in this context include those with learning difficulties being significantly more likely to be victimised (Wilson et al. 1996) and the elderly increasingly being the targets of financial exploitation (Navarro et al. 2012). Demonstrating how these characteristics may intersect (see Meyer 2010), victimisation among such demographics are also found to be especially high among immigrant populations (DeLiema et al. 2012). Specifically within the context of drugs, while the link between problematic drug use and offending has long been postulated (Bennett et al. 2008), its relationship to victimisation has been far less studied (Nunes and Sani 2013). Various ways in which this relationship might exist have been suggested, such as intoxication making users more vulnerable to predation (MacCoun et al. 2003). However, empirical findings commonly suggest that, similar to the drug crime nexus more broadly, drug use interplays with various other features such as deprivation and social exclusion to create the disproportionate levels of victimisation among this population (Neale et al. 2005; Stevens et al. 2007). With the absence of legitimate opportunities for marginalised and drug dependent populations to fund drug dependency, drug-related activities - including involvement in street-level dealing - have been argued to represent one of the 'best' and least harmful perceived ways to 'earn a score' (Moyle and Coomber 2015). In the 'virtually anarchic' conditions of drug markets (Jacques and Allen 2015), it could therefore be expected that varied forms of exploitation of stigmatised, criminalised and marginalised populations are likely to manifest.

The 'spread' or imitation of exploitative crime models such as those just outlined is also likely. Within social networks, aggregate deviant dynamics can emerge from individual deviant choices which evolve through the social learning mechanisms of imitation (Punzo 2016). 'Rational imitation' where a performance is observed and imitation is then predicated on the observed consequences (Akers and Jennings 2009), much like the roll out of 'new' terrorism methodologies (see McCauley and Moskalkenko 2014), is also possible. As cultural criminologists have noted, in a society characterised by the proliferation of media images of crime and deviance (Hayward and Presdee 2010), and where every facet of offending is reflected in a 'hall of mirrors' (see Ferrell 1999), it might also be suggested that 'the street scripts the screen and the screen scripts the street' (Hayward and Young 2004: 259). Such themes are particularly salient when considering UK gang or 'trap house' - referring to the place drugs are manufactured and distributed - rap culture, which is described as the gangs' 'primary cultural artefact' (see Storrod and Densley 2017).

### **Indoor drug market contexts**

Clandestine drug market activity taking place indoors has long been recognised as integral to how many markets function (Ancrum and Treadwell 2017; Briggs and Monge Gamero 2016; Gundur 2019). Noting that heroin and crack cocaine are the predominant substances dealt by County Lines, despite the proliferation of media images and cultural depictions of these markets being relatively 'open' and visible, such market structures have been on the decline in Western nations (Coomber 2015; Johnson et al. 2000). In the UK, so-called 'open' markets where dealers are prepared to offer drugs to passers-by and engage with unknown customers are now rare with 'closed' markets predominating (May and Hough 2004). Though closed markets have

always been present (Dorn et al. 1992), they have increased in response to myriad issues such as community interventions, law enforcement pressure, neighbourhood gentrification and the rise of pager and mobile phone technology (Curtis et al. 2002; Edmunds et al. 1996; May and Hough 2004). Drug transactions in closed markets are restricted to those known to the seller or otherwise vouched for by trusted third parties (Natarajan and Hough 2000; McSweeney et al. 2008). They occur in ‘safe’ places such as prearranged meetings at varied outdoor locations, at the seller’s own home, or at other relatively less visible spaces (Haroscopos and Hough 2005).

Examples of the latter category include those known euphemistically as ‘shooting galleries’ (Parkin and Coomber 2009) or ‘crack houses’ (Briggs 2010). These refer to specific residences which people visit to obtain and/or consume heroin, crack or other substances. Such spaces tend to become inhabited for several reasons: a desire not to use in a public space; if a heightened sense of urgency and immediacy is present; if those wanting to use cannot or are unwilling to do so in their own home; if there are perceived benefits of using within the social conditions associated with crack houses (Bourgois 2003; McCorkel 1998; Sterk-Elifson and Elifson 1993). The emergence of these venues garnered intense attention within the US and much of the foundational literature on the topic originates from within this context. Mirroring the aims of this paper, attention was placed on understanding the functioning of these drug venues and the variations between them. Several typologies were presented which delineated these venues in relation to features such as the social make-up of the visitors, the types of activity undertaken within them and their material conditions (Mieczkowski 1990; Geter 1994; Inciardi 1995). The propensity for violence and the overlap between these drug scenes and the sex industry, for example, was considered far greater in some than in others.

Comparatively less has been written about this in the context of the UK, although some valuable conceptual and empirical work has shed greater light on the area. Again highlighting the variance in how these venues operate in practice, Webster et al. (2001) identified a number of functioning types (see also Parkin and Coomber 2009). Of particular note was the identification of the ‘takeover’ crack house, described as a flat or house that had been appropriated by crack dealers. In an insightful study, Briggs (2010) recounted similar occurrences, with one of his informants recalling how a dealer had gained access to his flat under false pretences and set up a dealing operation from within. A Home Office (2003) assessment of powers to close crack houses highlights analogous themes, emphasising the ‘complex needs’ of some crack house residents who may have welfare and poly-drug use health related problems. The policy paper again stresses the propensity for vulnerable people (for example those with learning difficulties) who are ‘coerced’ into letting their property for drug supply, and also notes cases where women residents might be ‘under the influence’ of a partner who is often their drug dealer (Home Office 2003: 24).

## Cuckooing

The literature on crack houses therefore illustrates that, fuelled by the predatory inducing environment of illicit markets (Jacques and Allen 2015) and the social exclusion and vulnerabilities of many of those engaging within them (see Briggs 2010), there is a precedent of drug dealers using the homes of others to facilitate their

drug supply activities. As previously noted, drug markets are also geographically mobile. Evidence of mobile markets, particularly those evolving from cities like London to nearby conurbations, have been observed for years (e.g. Hales and Hobbs 2010), and likewise, established supply relationships between urban supply hubs and distant local markets, whilst under researched, also have provenance (Coomber and Moyle 2012). Coomber and Pyle (2015), for example, found Liverpool to be the source location for heroin in the coastal area of Torbay as well as nearby Plymouth (England). Due to the long distance travel (over 250 miles in these particular examples) required to connect whole sale stock with low-level suppliers in the local retail market, it was not uncommon for non-indigenous suppliers to visit these distant markets for ‘drop offs’ and in some cases stay for a short period before making their journey home. However, it has been suggested that it is the systematic application of the ‘parasitic’ nature of this model (Coliandris 2015), and the reliance on acquisition of a local property to facilitate 24/7 retail drug supply that makes cuckooing distinctive in the context of County Lines (Coomber and Moyle 2018). In this model, force is used against a vulnerable resident, or they are ‘befriended’, with the primary aim of acquiring their home. An *outpost* is then established for use by urban supply groups, not usually to directly retail from in the way traditionally associated with crack houses, but as a more general base in provincial towns to facilitate the County Lines methodology.

While this practice is yet to be commonly recognised or explored in detail in the criminological literature, it has earned wider cultural provenance. It was the cinematic focus of ‘*Junkhearts*’, the inspiration for the play ‘*Cuckoo*’ (see Morris 2011), depicted in the TV series ‘*Top Boy*’, and is commonly referenced in ‘grime’ and ‘trap house’ music (Storrod and Densley 2017). It has also appeared increasingly in the national media for more than eight years (see Doward 2010). Internationally there has been some allusion to the practice. As previously mentioned, Buerger (1992: 40) referred to the use of the ‘Cuckoo’s nest’ as a strategy employed by dealers in Minneapolis and Kansas City to obtain retail space and minimise police attention. More explicitly, Butera (2013) has documented how drug dependent tenants in various Canadian cities have had their homes taken over by ‘gangs’, who leveraged access and maintained compliance through manipulation and exploitation. In the British context, the first academic documentation of cuckooing was made by Coomber and Moyle in 2012 in a drug market rapid appraisal of Southend-on-Sea (see also Coomber 2015). Subsequent analysis has explored how it fits within the wider business model of County Lines. Spicer’s (2018) interviews with police officers suggested that supplying specifically in heroin and crack provided greater exposure to socially excluded, exploitable using populations whose homes could be taken advantage of (see also Robinson et al. 2018; Whittaker et al. 2019). Beyond drug using populations, Chakraborti and Garland (2015) have discussed how other people affected include those with learning difficulties, and suggest it can also manifest as a form of ‘disablist hate crime’. In particular, they highlight the tendency for these to be specifically targeted because of their disabilities, the role of social isolation in compounding their victimisation, and the added complexity engendered due to the likelihood of them having some form of relationship with those cuckooing them.

The extent to which this conforms to the systematic mistreatment of an individual or group by another individual or group suggests it potentially appropriate to understand

cuckooing as a form of ‘persecution’. The law enforcement literature on the subject, which has been dominant in shaping the broader narrative and how it is viewed, typically supports such an interpretation. Highlighting the way cuckooed victims are often seemingly specifically targeted, the NCA (2017: 12) state how County Lines dealers will specifically pursue ‘vulnerable individuals who attend recovery groups, dependency units, and areas associated with those experiencing problems’. Once cuckooed, victims effectively become imprisoned in their own homes (NCA 2017). Given this it has been suggested that appropriate responses to such cases, and to County Lines related exploitation more broadly, is to view it as a form of modern slavery (Stone 2018). Indeed, the recognition of manifold reasons why victims do not contact police adds congruence to this. These include a fear or distrust of police, repercussions from criminal justice or other state agencies, and intimidation from the perpetrators (Butera 2013). While violence has long been associated or even considered inherent to drug markets (Goldstein 1985), the emergence of cuckooing therefore ostensibly presents as a more nuanced and evolving form of victimisation within these subterranean milieus.

## Current study

This dominant understanding of cuckooing, with both practitioner and media publications suggesting that it is an inherently exploitative process (BBC News 2019; NCA 2016; Williams and Finlay 2018) inevitably involving persecution and violence, is understandable, especially when cases that exemplify and reinforce this viewpoint are given significant attention. In this paper, we do not seek to downplay the serious harms that have and continue to be experienced by those affected. Following Moyle (forthcoming), the data we present speaks to the violence, coercion and exploitation often emergent from this practice. However, we do aim to take a step back to highlight and provide insight into the ‘varied’ experiences of cuckooing (Coomber and Moyle 2018) by developing a typology. As an analytical lens, Coomber (2015) has argued that awareness of the differences between markets and the practices within them is integral to insightful drug market research (see also Salinas 2018). Here, therefore, we seek to shed light on its realities, provide critical insight into the range and experiences of those involved, and promote awareness and further consideration of its variance. The types are, in the Weberian sense, ‘ideal’ and not static. Nonetheless, deploying these conceptualisations helps to highlight the fluidity of the practice, situate nuance and provide an insight into the intricacies of the relationships and dynamics of those involved (McKinney 1966). Unpicking this complexity arguably also has the potential to inform appropriate law enforcement of approaches that move beyond ‘symbolic’ practices (Coomber et al. 2017) and prioritise reducing drug market harms (Bacon 2016).

By focusing on the practice of cuckooing and those involved, we also attempt to fill significant gaps in knowledge of the effect of County Lines in the areas they operate in. As previously alluded to, the primary concern with regard to this supply model from political (APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults 2017), practitioner (St Giles Trust 2018), media (Guardian 2019) and academic (Storrod and Densley 2017; Robinson et al. 2018; Windle and Briggs 2015) perspectives, has been the criminal

exploitation of children and young people from exporting hubs who move drugs and money across county borders, and the subsequent harms they are exposed to. Instead, we seek to explore the impact of County Lines on the importing areas and on local adult populations. As so-called ‘victim/perpetrators’ (Coliandris 2015) - many of whom are addicted to heroin and/or crack cocaine, repeat offenders, and known to the police - these are unlikely to be framed in ‘ideal victim’ narratives (Christie 1986). Nevertheless, they are frequently exposed to serious harms, and play a fundamental role in the presence and supply activities of those engaged in County Lines supply.

## Methods

This paper draws on data from two distinct yet complimentary qualitative studies. Study one, conducted by the first author (JS), involved ethnographic fieldwork with an anonymised UK police force significantly affected by County Lines activity from 2017 to 2018. A mixed methods approach consisting of ninety one days of observations of front-line responses to County Lines across four towns, analysis of police intelligence and twenty seven in-depth interviews with police officers, staff and those working for other relevant agencies was undertaken. Informed consent was provided by all respondents and in addition to obtaining relevant ethical approval, the researcher was vetted by the police force in question due to the sensitivity of the data being viewed. Steps were also taken to ensure the anonymity of all respondents and the subjects of intelligence, including relevant officers reviewing the anonymised data presented in this paper.

Study two was undertaken by the second author (LM) in Wiltshire (UK) in 2016. This research draws principally on 18 interviews with drug market actors who had worked on behalf of County Lines dealers ( $n = 14$ ), or had regularly purchased drugs from them ( $n = 4$ ). This data was then supported by key person interviews ( $n = 3$ ) and a stand-alone observation. The author undertook fieldwork in three locations in Wiltshire and access to drug market actors was provided through local drug services/charitable organisation in Swindon ( $n = 3$ ), Salisbury ( $n = 13$ ) and Chippenham ( $n = 2$ ). In the first site, the researcher undertook an additional observation of Swindon’s Manchester Road street sex market. All but one respondent (who identified as ‘white Irish’) described themselves as white British and the gender split of the sample (excluding practitioners) was fairly even with ten respondents identifying as women and eight as men. The average age of the sample of drug market actors was 37 (range 24–50). Of the 14 respondents who had direct experience of working for County Lines dealers, all had worked as drug runners, and of this group, seven had also ‘rented’ their accommodation/become ‘cuckooed’.

A key overarching research aim for both studies was to develop a greater understanding of the realities of the County Lines drug supply model. Similar to others (cf. McCarthy and O’Neill 2014), collaboration by combining data and analysis from two studies with a similar focus gave an opportunity to elevate the insights provided by our separate findings. For example, the wide ranging yet often shallow nature of police intelligence (Cope 2004) complemented the in-depth specific cases discussed in interviews with affected individuals. Data were coded in an iterative process identifying similarities and differences in cuckooing cases. After identifying thematic overlaps in our analysis a collaborative process of developing and refining the cuckooing types was



undertaken. Finally, a process of ‘member checking’ (Seale 1999) was employed, with the typology proposed to respondents who had extensive knowledge and exposure to cuckooing. As a supplementary research strategy this is considered particularly valuable in studies of an inductive nature (Charmaz 2014). For our analysis it helped refine the types and our explication of them, as well as ensuring that the findings presented are grounded in the variegated realities of the street level drug market.

## Findings

Our analysis identified four typologies of cuckooing, each left purposely broad to allow for important variance within them. Our range of qualitative data allowed for this appreciation and provides insight into the experiences and complexities of specific cases. What this variance both within and between cases ultimately hinges on is the *relationship* between these cuckoos and their local ‘hosts’, and the manner in which access to homes is leveraged and maintained. Speaking to this variance, beyond the classic model associated with County Lines networks we also identify what appears to be a growing trend of the cuckooing model being used locally by indigenous populations, rather than ‘out of town’ dealers.

### Cuckooing typology 1: Parasitic Nest invading

Corresponding with the dominant narrative surrounding cuckooing were cases where individuals had not wanted dealers to enter and occupy their homes, with them having done so under false pretence or with force. Because of the very nature of the circumstances and the inherently exploitative relationships between those involved, this could therefore be considered as arguably the archetype of the cuckooing practice and, extending this analogy, we term this ‘*parasitic nest invading*’. Tactics of obtaining initial access to homes varied, but often involved a level of sophistication as opposed to the staple illicit market recourse of violence and intimidation (Hautala et al. 2019; Treadwell et al. 2018). Those affected by this form of cuckooing were often ‘classically’ vulnerable through characteristics such as mental illness, disability or old age (see Chakraborti and Garland 2015). For example, one case involved a young runner befriending a retired man with mental health issues in a local coffee shop. Once access to his home was obtained it was swiftly taken over and used to house drugs, a sawn off shotgun and other runners. Another involved County Line dealers using a female accomplice to pose as a mother in desperate circumstances. Once a local resident became lured in by her, she proceeded to enable the dealers to take over the home:

*That was just a conversation outside a shop. The woman said that she was homeless, she had come from somewhere with her children, and that's how they got into that property. This person was vulnerable, felt sorry for them, thought that they would avoid [the] bedroom tax by having someone else living with them.*

Neighbourhood Officer, Housing Provider (Study one)

Cases such as these represent clear cut exploitation, with unambiguous processes of invasion, prolonged ‘pollution’ of homes (Maguire 1980) and many of those affected

conforming to ‘ideal victim’ status (Christie 1986). Indeed, it would appear precisely due to some of these characteristics such as being elderly or having learning difficulties that they presented as suitable targets. However, it is important to note that others who experienced such ‘parasitic’ practices were users of heroin and/or crack. In such cases, initial access to their home was also obtained under false pretences, but with dealers using their relationship with them as a customer or scoping them out outside local drug services or pharmacists to leverage opportunities. One such case stemmed from a heroin and crack using couple agreeing with a County Lines dealer that his supposed ‘cousin’, who was visiting the local area, could stay in their spare room:

*We said, yes, okay then, you know, [we] don't want to see anyone on the street, yes, that's absolutely fine. And then, within a matter of weeks, that actual main man and the person who was renting, literally just took over the house. They were beating my partner daily, it was a nightmare, an absolute nightmare. It did happen rather quick, them taking over. So, yes, in that situation, it's so hard, like, what do you do, do you tell the police? Do you put up with it? It's horrible.*

Emma, heroin and crack user (Study two)

While drug use, especially of heroin and crack, would typically exclude individuals from being considered an ideal victim – in fact in Christie’s (1986) classic formulation drug use was instead considered something attributable to the ideal offender - it is notable that it was their exposure to the illicit market and the influx of outsider dealers that made them vulnerable to these predatory forms of cuckooing. It would appear that to generate a strong foothold within a satellite area County Lines dealers often take advantage of the local heroin and crack ‘moral economy’ (Wakeman 2016; see also Moyle, forthcoming). This illustrates an arguably novel and evolving vulnerability of local users, not just to the ‘virtually anarchic’ (Jacques and Allen 2015) conditions of drug markets, but to exposure to increased numbers of predatory and commercial out of town dealers. As illustrated by the above quote, and corresponding with Robinson et al’s. (2018) findings where some County Lines dealers talked of committing highly degrading acts towards those whose home they using, beyond having their homes taken over, this can lead to nightmarish experiences of violence, often going beyond instrumental objectives and into the expressive realm (see Copes et al. 2015).

### **Cuckooing typology 2: Quasi-cuckooing**

Cases where notions of willingness and consent to host dealers were more complex we term ‘quasi-cuckooing’. Adopted ‘in vivo’ (Strauss and Corbin 1998) from a police officer during fieldwork, this term reflects the ambiguities common within many cases broadly referred to by the police and others under the umbrella term ‘cuckooing’. Notably, cases within this type almost always involved local drug users and also included a wider variance of experiences. Common was an individual being (to various degrees) initially willing for dealers to enter their home, with many conceiving their presence as ‘reciprocal renting’ described by a respondent in Coomber and Moyle (2018: 11) as an arrangement where: ‘*depending on how much they’ve sold, how much business they’ve done, whether you let them stay overnight,*

*or whether you go out and just leave them your keys ... So they're sort of almost paying rental fees, in drugs'. However, despite the perceived potential mutual benefits of such scenarios, these often evolved, with hosts subsequently becoming uncomfortable with the supplier's presence.*

Although to a lesser degree, similar to the parasitic model initial access was sometimes achieved under some form of deception or false pretence. Some cases, for example, involved dealers not fully revealing the extent of their intentions or convincing their host that their stay would be fleeting or strictly time limited. However, not all forms of quasi-cuckooing were predicated on deception. Being aware of the seller's intentions, some local hosts were seemingly naive to the realities of life in a cuckooed nest. For some it was viewed as a more attractive alternative to funding their drug use than acquisitive crime:

*'That's why I did it because it saved me going out nicking, instead of doing that I had it there.'*

Susie, crack user (Study two)

Alternatively, perhaps akin to a form of 'fetishistic disavowal' (Zizek 2008), others seemingly did not *want* to know the true realities, with any reservations they did have being overridden by offers of drugs or financial compensation. A manager of a local drug service, many of whose service users had become embroiled in such cuckooing scenarios, spoke of these multiple complex pathways:

*"Certain times it might be a bit of naivety, sometimes it might be sort of desperation in terms of their involvement with the gangs. Sometimes they're pursuing their active addictions and things might get to a point where all of a sudden they find themselves in lots of debt and then become more easily exploited. And the problem is now it's not with local dealers, it's with heavies being shipped in from other parts of the country."*

Manager of Drug and Alcohol Service (Study one)

Having entered into a cuckooing scenario, the quasi-cuckooed residents often idealistic or 'neutralised' (Sykes and Matza 1957) expectations of the set-up and rewards available were therefore often swiftly dispelled, prompting them to seek to remove their now unwanted guests. The specific reasons for individuals wanting to end their cuckoo setup varied, but the threat or use of violence often served as a potent catalyst. Exposure to a gun and the disappearance of a kitchen knife were both incidents which instigated residents to seek to remove the dealers from their home. Unfortunately, however, it was frequently the case that if an individual made these feelings known then the risk of violence towards them in order to ensure compliance was severely raised. Violence appeared to be particularly common when formally compliant locals began to resist the demands of County Lines dealers:

*'It's when they start refusing to do what they're asking them to, that's when we see a lot of the really nasty violence'*

Police Officer (Study one)

In addition to the threat of violence, other related harms which created and exacerbated existing vulnerabilities also occurred. Having been cuckooed, one respondent moved out of their home and start sleeping on the streets. Conversely, others became entrapped in their home with the dealers refusing to allow them to leave or speak to friends, family or welfare services for prolonged periods of time. Some County Lines dealers also began charging them for the drugs they had been given for free. In keeping with intelligence data from the NCA (2017), continued use of their home was often one stipulation of this debt repayment plan, as was undertaking labour such as being a runner – a practice understood as ‘debt bondage’ (Robinson et al. 2018).

However, further highlighting the variation and complexity of the practice, not all cases of quasi-cuckooing evolved into overt forms of exploitation. Rather than fears of violence, it was the realisation of the risk from law enforcement by housing dealers that served as cause for some to remove them from their home. This appeared to be particularly pertinent for those who also engaged in forms of labour such as running. Notably, even if heightened police attention was not necessarily founded in reality, there was evidence that the threat of this served as a powerful recourse for some locals, who were often able to use it to their advantage to remove unwanted cuckoos. Mike, a heroin user who became uncomfortable with housing and running for County Lines dealers found it to be a valuable tool for extracting his participation and distancing himself from these out of town dealers:

*Respondent: It was only, like, a couple of weeks, and then I said, I can't do this. They still tried ringing me, and that, and I just avoided the calls.*

*Interviewer: Okay. So, since, they've tried to call you?*

*Respondent: Yes.*

*Interviewer: So, what did you just tell them that you didn't want them there anymore and they left?*

*Respondent: I just said, it's getting hot.*

*Interviewer: Okay, so you told them you thought the police were ...*

*Respondent: Yes.*

*Interviewer: And, was that enough for them to go?*

*Respondent: Yes.*

Mike, heroin user (Study two)

In contrast with many of the dominant enforcement narratives which emphasise coercion and the passivity of County Lines labourers, such cases highlight the capacity for resistance and agency from residents in the right circumstances (Moyle forthcoming). That noted, further illustrating the complexities and ambiguities implicit within this form of cuckooing, despite having often deleterious experiences, many local users fell back into such scenarios with the same or a different County Lines group (Coomber and Moyle 2018). This was often the case for those who, having successfully removed dealers from their home perhaps with the help of the police or other agencies, subsequently failed to engage with further support or remained firmly entrenched in the local crack and heroin milieu (Moyle forthcoming). As a welfare officer for a local authority explained, this then continued to expose them to the very conditions and people that had led them into being cuckooed in the first place:

*I have had some of them that have really regretted it, mind. And they've come away from it. But if they don't get their life right it's so easy to go back in. Because it's out there. It's almost like... like you and I we probably wouldn't see it. But in that level down, they know everything that's going on. They all know each other; that's the thing.*

Welfare Officer (Study one)

Unsurprisingly, the role of drug use also played a significant part in those who returned to housing County Lines dealers. For many, the prospect of free and readily available drugs that previously lured them in often proved too tempting (Coomber and Moyle 2018). Corresponding with Robinson et al's. (2018) findings, cuckooing dealers appeared to be aware of the power of this, harnessing it to not only (re)gain and retain access, but also to ensure compliance. A heroin user who witnessed many cuckooing situations in their local drug market spoke of how those affected found themselves in often disordered conditions, simultaneously wanting the dealers to leave, but also being made complicit by receiving just enough drugs to maintain acquiescent:

*I've heard like (whisper) 'I can't get rid of these fucking people'...and I'm thinking you can't but you sort of don't want to...it's like medicine on tap...they totally know what they are doing, they just give them enough to just keep them ticking over...they don't want them gouged out. A little of each, just enough to get a bit of a buzz a few times a day, little bit in the morning. [As] an addict you want that little bit in the morning...and to me these people look like prisoners.*

Craig, heroin user (Study two)

Notably, even under fairly non-problematic cuckooing scenarios where overt violence and exploitation wasn't present, the propensity for this to exacerbate drug related consequences remained. For example, Neil, the partner of Suzie (see above) who considered renting to be an agreeable alternative means of generating funds, found his drug use escalated to such an extent that he ended up destitute:

Respondent: *"The main thing was, I ended up losing my house and my car, because where there was someone in the other room with drugs all the time, any time I got my dole money, or any money, I'd keep going into the room and just buy it until I was skint. Then, I lunched out the house, the car, everything."*

Interviewer: *"Right, so having the gear [drugs] in such close proximity was..."*

Respondent: *"Yes, it was too tempting, I just spent all my money on it, until I ended up on the street."*

Neil, heroin and crack user (Study two)

Reflecting the often chaotic nature of the heroin and crack drug markets (Briggs 2010; Fagan and Chin 1990; Moyle and Coomber 2015), the varied cases falling under this typology illustrate how many - perhaps even most - incidences of cuckooing are, at their core, ambiguous and complex. Far from being a linear process it can also often be cyclical, with individuals drifting in and out of cuckooing situations. Notions of willingness and agency can then also be blurred,

varying over time but also, in the haze of drug dependency and the drug milieu, difficult to determine at any given moment.

### Cuckooing typology 3: Coupling

A third typology of cuckooing identified concerned situations where, as part of the process of obtaining access to a home, male County Lines dealers had entered into sexual activity relationships with female residents. Such scenarios illustrate the often ambiguous nature of cuckooing, as well as problematizing oversimplified binary notions of willingness or unwillingness on the part of local residents. Our data highlighted the prevalence of these types of set-ups, with multiple cases of young urban runners having sexual encounters with local heroin and crack users. When attempting to unpick the complexities of these relationships, police intelligence was inevitably only able to show a partial picture. Our interview data with affected locals, however, shone greater light on not just the prevalence of this practice, but also the complexities and variance.

One woman who had alcohol dependency and mental health issues, spoke of how she had been approached by County Lines dealers who suggested they went back to her flat ‘*for a drink and party*’. After having sex with one of them, within a few days he and other dealers had taken over her flat:

*“Every night there’d be different people coming down from London in a car...I’d be asleep about 2/3 in the morning and people are outside my door and I’m thinking how the hell [are] they in house...but it’s kinda scary cos I’m thinking these are from north London and they’re coming into my house, why are they coming in at this time in the morning? Why don’t they just come during the day? And it’s just...if it was same people I wouldn’t have been so suspicious because every night it was different people and I was like well I dunno who these people are...what they do...half of them had knives in their pockets...and it was like...I don’t want this shit in my house.”*

Gina, non-user (Study two)

Notably, for Gina, as opposed to more conventional motivations for engaging in cuckooing, it was the power of the supposed relationship that kept her as a compliant host. In her words, ‘*I wasn’t doing [it] for the money I was doing it for the love*’. Such cases illustrate the capacity for dealers to recognise and harness the specific vulnerabilities of certain women and, perhaps similar to the grooming process of child sexual exploitation (McAlinden 2012), prey on them to enable a cuckooing situation. For others the role of a sexual relationship took perhaps a more familiar exploitative role and interplayed with their drug use. Claire, for example, spoke of how dealers used demands of sex as a further stipulation for her receiving drugs:

*‘I had sex with one of the guys a few times like, but if you didn’t then you wouldn’t get your drugs so it sort of become part of it you know...and I had a massive crack habit at the time which has been worse than my heroin habit throughout the years and that’s why I’ve got a grip on it now but I didn’t have at the time and I’d have to sleep with this bloke and it was awful you know...’*

Claire, heroin and crack user (Study two)

In its varied forms, being predicated on the sexual relationship between locals and out of town dealers, the practice of coupling therefore presents as qualitatively different from other types of cuckooing. This further illustrates County Lines harms that go beyond simply youth involvement, as well as highlighting a further link between drugs and sexual practices. Drug dealing has classically been depicted as a ‘man’s world’ (Adler 1993) and with regard to County Lines this can often take highly exploitative forms. However, despite the exploitative practice shaping this supply model, and any choices that were made being significantly constrained, it should be recognised that some women demonstrated agency and intentionality in harnessing such relationships as resources to enable them to avoid theft and street-level sex work and fund their addiction (Moyle forthcoming). Similarities between this and other typologies are also visible. Cases where a sexual relationship serves as a precursor to County Lines dealers leveraging access to a home, for example, bears resemblance to forms of ‘quasi – cuckooing’. Indeed, the way that County Lines dealers use this relationship to facilitate their drug supply model, can itself perhaps be viewed as a form of quasi - relationship (Moyle forthcoming).

Regardless of their nature, as noted by a police officer, particularly notable about ‘coupling’ forms of cuckooing was that it typically led to a County Line residing habitually in their home making it “*very difficult for the user to get the runner out of the address after that*”. With this form of cuckooing being increasingly observed, a question to consider is whether it is a cunning tactic or a reflection of the progressively embedded nature of County Lines groups in satellite towns. Our findings would suggest it can be both, with coupling used as a further exploitative tool, as well as it allowing dealers to lay down more permanent roots within the import areas and reinforcing their local dominance.

#### **Cuckooing typology 4: ‘Local cuckooing’ beyond county lines – The evolution of a generic crime model?**

The three typologies presented above all revolve around cases involving out of town dealers as the ‘cuckoos’. This was somewhat inevitable given the ‘County Lines’ focus of the research. Yet, while cuckooing has been understood almost universally within this context, when exploring the issue evidence emerged of the practice evolving and being undertaken by locals who would appropriate the homes of those living in the same areas. Indeed, sometimes this was so localised that it would involve cases in the same block of flats as the cuckoos lived themselves. The nature of these ‘local’ cases overlaps to a large degree with the aforementioned typologies, with exploitation and blurred notions of complicity frequently present. But as it is a local model with slightly different drivers we suggest it is appropriate to be classified separately.

Local cuckooing was identified as occurring both in more rural areas where County Lines were present and in major cities. Notably, for many respondents this was a relatively new phenomenon, with little historical precedent. While local premises being used for drug activity similar to the functioning of crack houses was not unfamiliar, the use and exploitation of other people’s homes by drug dealers as more general bases was considered novel. For the rural areas it was speculated that local dealers had recognised the practice being successfully undertaken by County Lines groups and began imitating

them. In city locales one suggestion was that this practice was undertaken by dealing groups of specific ethnicities:

*'It does seem to be usually them [suppliers of Asian ethnicity] and I do wonder if it's because they still live in their family home and can't take it back so need other places to stash stuff'*

Detective (Study one)

But in other major conurbations with little ethnic diversity local cuckooing was evident among young white males. While many of these likely lived at home themselves, this dispels the notion that it was a practice attributable to certain ethnic groups. Indeed, somewhat conversely, it was also mentioned that sometimes the victims of cuckooing were the parents of the cuckoo themselves. Whether this particular example is appropriate to be considered as cuckooing is debateable itself but contributes to the explication of the blurred lines of the issue.

Further building on the theme of variance a diversification of activities involved in these incidences of local cuckooing was apparent. In addition to conventional practices of drugs being sold or stashed in properties there were also examples of homes being taken over as cannabis grow spaces, or being used to store firearms and weapons. Similar to the strategies identified by Buerger (1992) in the US, appropriating the homes of others and creating 'nests' therefore appeared to be increasingly recognised by dealers and criminals more broadly as a way of shielding themselves from law enforcement attention:

*'Obviously as a dealer you don't want any drugs in your own house, do you? It's just another layer of protection'.*

Police Officer (Study one)

While being mindful of the limitations of our data, given the presence of local cuckooing it would appear worthwhile to consider whether it is a nascent crime model. This is especially the case given that it was considered as being relatively new and that there were a diverse number of ways that it was being undertaken. While the concept has been tied up with County Lines there is seemingly nothing intrinsic about cuckooing needing to be about itinerant crime. The more general benefits it provides may now present as a popular practice for some at the local level within their own communities.

## Discussion

Though cuckooing is offered as a practice that has emerged from, and is uniquely distinctive of, the County Lines supply methodology (NCA 2016; HM Government 2018; Stone 2018), we have attempted to complicate this narrative, both through identifying its antecedents and contextualising what may first appear as a parochial crime model. At the micro level, just as significant differences were identified in the functioning of crack houses (Geter 1994; Inciardi 1995; Parkin and Coomber 2009; Mieczkowski 1990), recognising variation within this latest indoor drug market practice



is important. Our typology presents a picture of cuckooing that demonstrates the complexity, ambiguities and variance commonly underscoring the practice. The often cyclical nature of those affected withdrawing then returning to such situations, and the fluidity observed between and within different types, illustrates the sometimes subtle variances of this model. Notions of complexity and seeking to pin down issues of culpability and compliance are also compounded within the broader drug market milieu where problematic drug use, social exclusion (Seddon 2006) and conceptions of ‘vulnerability’ abound (see Brown 2011). Whilst recognising that those who experienced cuckooing are not exclusively users of heroin or crack, our findings also add to the under-researched areas of drug user victimisation (Nunes and Sani 2013) and the victims of organised crime more widely (Windle and Silke 2019). Relating this back to our findings it is notable how exposure to the practice of cuckooing was highly likely to exacerbate heroin and crack user’s vulnerabilities and social exclusion, as well as heighten their risk of criminalisation. This adds further insight into the disproportionate levels of drug related harm experienced by those at the lower ends of the socio-economic hierarchy (Stevens 2011).

Because of the nature of many cases, the wider social context and agency of those affected becomes worthy of consideration. Sandberg’s (2008) concept of street capital is useful for understanding how some are able to find the resources to push back against experiences of unwanted cuckooing and why some are seemingly able resist cuckooing all together (see Moyle forthcoming). Similar to recent arguments in relation to the undertaking of street robbery and female gang involvement (Deuchar et al. 2018; Harding et al. 2018) consideration of Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and economic and social capital also seem important in considering how structural pressures and cultural norms can combine and become internalised to a produce a ‘practical sense’ - with drug-related activities representing an instinctive solution for income generation (see Moyle and Coomber 2017). It is seemingly the combination of factors such as these which expose people to cuckooing, or makes them initially willing to house dealers. Just as has been observed in relation to recovering from drug dependency (Granfield and Cloud 2001) and domestic violence (Waldrop and Resick 2004), those with greater social capital also appear more likely to be able to break free from cuckooing situations and its often recurring and cyclical nature. But ultimately, regardless of which typology an individual case might fit into, it is important to recognise the disruptive and unsettling nature of this practice and the impact this can have on an individual’s life (Chakraborti and Garland 2015). Building on the notion of home invasion, much of what has been discussed regarding the experiences of burglary victims such as prolonged feelings of unease, insecurity and violation (Angel et al. 2014) and a broader sense of their home being ‘polluted’ (Maguire 1980) would appear germane to cuckooing.

Beyond problematising simplistic understandings of how cuckooing manifests and experienced, it is the implications of this crime model at a macro level that are perhaps most notable. The majority of early ‘journey-to-crime’ studies suggested that travel associated with crime is limited and mostly local in nature (e.g. Wiles and Costello 2000). However, emergent international studies have increasingly found offender travel to be more widespread with long crime trips more common than first reported (e.g. Morselli and Royer 2008; Rattner and Portnov 2007). The principal drivers for this step change include higher perceived success rates in smaller municipalities, along with

lower anticipated levels of risk and higher profit levels (Vandeviver et al. 2014; Van Daele and Vander Beken 2010). In addition to the presence of incentives to travel further, mobile offenders are also expected to compensate for their increased criminal commute through engaging in longer stays at their selected crime site (Felson 2006: 265). Arguably in keeping with broader (legitimate) retail developments (see Coomber and Moyle 2018; Spicer 2018), cuckooing seems to represent a crime model evocative of these new trends.

Important implications emerge from this. If the extensive adoption of the County Lines supply methodology over recent years (see NCA 2017) can be considered as having spread through an overlap of experiences and processes of social learning through exposure (Punzo 2016), combined with ‘rational imitation’ (Akers and Jennings 2009) from other dealers and social networks, there is likely a propensity for a key element of the model to be adopted and applied in other criminal contexts. Our data on the emergence of ‘local’ cuckooing, combined with theoretical insights from differential association (Matsueda 1988), and how specific forms of crime can spread among social networks (Punzo 2016), would appear to add significant weight to this. With indications that trends of outreach retail drug supply are becoming prevalent in other countries (EMCDDA, personal communication; Vice 2019), in addition to our findings suggesting it increasingly presenting as a popular crime model within a local context, we might expect to see similar models develop and spread in international spaces. Combined, there is consequently a risk that cuckooing not only continues to evolve but significantly spreads, becoming a more general crime model within the UK and an international drug market phenomenon. Further research, but also specific reflection on the policy and practice implications of this are likely to be of importance.

## Conclusion

This article has documented the variance of the cuckooing practice, the experiences of those exploited and its propensity for evolution as a crime model. It has analysed a significant aspect of the County Lines phenomenon that, compared to the involvement of young people, has hitherto received little critical, empirical or more general academic attention. From the large number of cases identified by our analysis and the multiple sites where they are situated, our findings arguably provide a good ‘snapshot’ of the current state of cuckooing, at least in the areas where the data was collected. However, drug market practices continually change, develop and evolve (Curtis and Wendel 2007). They are also highly situational (Coomber 2015). It is therefore possible to envisage situations where other forms of cuckooing develop that differ from these cases. The presence of ‘local’ cuckooing is a good example of this, and given that it now appears to be taking place beyond the County Lines methodology it is worth considering whether it represents a generally evolving crime model.

Developing a more detailed and appreciative picture of the practice within the UK is therefore of great importance. In a recent report on ‘gang’ activities in Walthamstow Forest (Whittaker et al. 2019) it was suggested that County Lines dealers do not target those deemed purely vulnerable to take over their homes. Our study, however, with the identified cases of ‘parasitic nest stealing’, would suggest that while these populations

are typically avoided, if this is all that is available, or a fortuitous opportunity presents itself, then dealers are willing to capitalise on this. Indeed, it could be envisaged that recourse to these populations may increase as a result of the intensive policing crackdown operations undertaken recently across the UK, often arresting the more traditional cuckoo targets of problematic users (see Coomber et al. 2017). Further monitoring is also likely to be beneficial with regard to the potential evolution of the model as a broader form of criminality and its presence internationally. For other countries, lessons may be able to be learnt from the UK experience to implement effective responses. Although opportunities for early warnings similar to those visible within the context of drug use rarely occur in relation to markets, they could be applied to flag up signs of market evolution in terms of cuckooing (see Coomber and Moyle 2012). This should help to implement interventions at earlier stages, rather than practices becoming well established before organisations become aware what is happening. When doing so, as cuckooing is undertaken in various and sometimes less obvious ways, responses based on criminalisation that compound exclusion are unlikely to prove beneficial to the individual or as a wider response to reducing this form of drug market exploitation.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of the West of England and Royal Holloway University's Research Ethics Committee, and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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