

## **CUCKOOING: An Overview**

The criminal landscape is changing in sinister new ways, in plain sight, such that they are not always readily apparent.

For example, of particular growing concern is the increasing number of domestic premises, ordinary people's homes, across England, that are being taken over by gangs to disguise their criminal activities, typically drug crime, "County Lines" (*"County Lines" describes where illegal drugs are transported from one area to another, often across police and local authority boundaries (although not exclusively), usually by children or vulnerable people who are coerced into it by gangs. The 'County Line' is the mobile phone line used to take the orders of drugs. Importing areas (areas where the drugs are taken to) are reporting increased levels of violence and weapons-related crimes as a result of this trend.*) drug trafficking, though not exclusively. The occupants are usually included, and tend to be vulnerable people. This criminal phenomenon is known by the police as "cuckooing", the key characteristic of which is the use of coercion, both psychological and physical, so fear and actual violence are amongst the defining features, along with financial abuse.

What sorts of people may succumb to 'cuckooing'? They can include drug users, but older people, those suffering from mental or physical health problems, female sex workers, single mums and people living in poverty are more typical victims. Targeted people may also be those with other vulnerabilities such as addictions like alcoholism and gambling, or being already known to the police. A criminal's tactic to gain initial access to someone's home may therefore be to offer "free" drugs or alcohol.

However, there is no room for complacency; there are many other sorts of vulnerability eg especially currently, debt/cost of living pressures, that make some people outside these more obvious target groups potentially susceptible. "Cuckooing" criminals are highly skilled manipulators of human behaviour, so an open mind should be kept as to who might become a victim of 'cuckooing". It makes this crime a possible unforeseen consequence of the current cost-of-living-crisis, a new "bed-fellow" of poverty to be reckoned with.

Once gangs are in control and move in come the associated risks of domestic abuse, sexual exploitation and violence, with children as well as adults at risk of harm and being drawn into the criminality. This places more pressure on the protective resources of the safeguarding system at a difficult time of extraordinary budgetary challenge for all the public services.

Such tends to be the enterprising nature of the criminal mind, that it is not uncommon for gangs to have access to several addresses. This allows them to move quickly between vulnerable people's homes for just a few hours, days or longer to evade detection. "Cuckooing" therefore enables criminals to carry-on their illegal activity discreetly, under the police radar, making it a very attractive criminal option.

At the same time, these gangs may also use accommodation in rural areas, including serviced apartments, holiday lets, budget hotels and caravan parks, to be even more anonymous.

Once criminals are using a victim's property for crime, in addition to the intimidation and violence, there are other ways the criminals maintain the occupants' cooperation. For example, one such is the fear that if they go to the police they will risk being suspected of involvement in the criminal activity themselves, or of being regarded as a member of the gang, which could result in their eviction from the property. Apart from this, in the extreme some vulnerable adults might even feel they have no alternative but to simply leave their homes, making themselves homeless, as the only means of escaping their predicament.

Some idea of the nature of this criminal problem can be gauged from the statistics below recently obtained from the Metropolitan Police for the period 01/04/19 to 31/01/22, in response to a Freedom of Information request. The data for the listed categories of offending, describes those elements of criminal activity present as a percentage proportion of the overall crime of "cuckooing". It is a significant that violence stands out as a prominent ingredient in "cuckooing" as experienced by the police in London, which is probably mirrored elsewhere too.

Percentage of Cuckooing Flagged Offences	Recorded Year			
	2019 *	2020	2021	2022 *
Major Crime Category				
Violence Against the Person	30.2%	26.4%	50.4%	60.0%
Sexual Offences	2.3%	3.4%	2.3%	0.0%
Robbery	11.6%	9.2%	4.7%	6.7%
Burglary	24.4%	8.0%	8.5%	6.7%
Vehicle Offences	1.2%	3.4%	1.6%	0.0%
Theft	10.5%	14.9%	14.0%	6.7%
Arson and Criminal Damage	3.5%	10.3%	6.2%	0.0%
Drug Offences	12.8%	20.7%	7.0%	20.0%
Possession of Weapons	0.0%	2.3%	1.6%	0.0%
Public Order Offences	2.3%	0.0%	3.9%	0.0%
Miscellaneous Crimes Against Society	1.2%	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%
	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
* 2019 and 2022 should not be compared to other complete calendar years.				

Earlier data obtained from police forces around the country via a Freedom of Information (FOI) [request by the Guardian newspaper in 2019](#), revealed the extent to which the number of “Closure Orders” (A Closure Order is a provision of the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014) prohibiting criminal access to the premises for a specified period not exceeding 3 months, had been used by them to tackle the problem. They provided a measure of the response to the issue showing how their use had quadrupled in the four years, from 46 in 2014, to a total of 186 in 2018, demonstrating that “Cuckooing” was a rapidly growing new criminal issue.

This development was underlined by comments made by several police services responding at the time of the FOI request, and even though these are almost three years old, they give specific insight into how this new crime has been evolving : North Yorkshire Police said cuckooing was a major concern in their area. As of 30 June 2019, 90 victims of cuckooing had been identified in the year and 17 cease and desist notices in related cases had been issued. This contrasted with 39 victims for the previous year. Devon and Cornwall Police said that as of 22 August 2019 residents of about 200 homes were known to be at risk of cuckooing and were being safeguarded by police. They said those numbers were subject to constant change and the force was taking the issue very seriously. Bedfordshire Police said the sharp rise in Closure Orders used, increasing from one to 42 in four years, demonstrated its commitment to acting against drug criminality and anti-social behaviour.

Now, four years on, the nationwide National County Lines Intensification Week which took place between the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> March 2022, showed how much progress has been achieved in a relatively short time, given that more than 1,444 people were arrested, and 671 vulnerable people safeguarded in the course of the week in a concerted crackdown on County Lines drug gangs. Significantly, as part of this 799 “cuckooed” addresses were visited and 7,919 people were engaged with for safeguarding purposes. It was therefore a success, demonstrating the elevated priority and resourcing allocated to tackling “Cuckooing” in acknowledgement of its seriousness both as a criminal and humanitarian issue. The initiative involved a major commitment by all police forces across England and Wales, with their safeguarding partners for adults and children.

Encouragingly, the ending of the Covid pandemic and its restrictions should enable the identification and investigation of “cuckooing” to become much more effective, and make it harder for criminals to operate unobserved.

Clearly this is a massive issue for the health, housing, and social care sectors, along with their safeguarding partners, key amongst whom are the police. Fluent communication between them all is therefore essential if effective action against “cuckooing” is to take place. Landlords and domiciliary care providers in particular have a special responsibility to exercise a careful watch over the people they provide care and a home to, for the signs of exploitation. It requires a continuous process of due diligence by all relevant partners, including the general public, and to be one of everyone’s priorities if this insidious and highly damaging activity is to be kept at bay and challenged effectively.

In terms of next-steps, publicity campaigns are probably needed to help people to understand the problem, so that they can recognise the signs, for example if it is happening to someone in their family, a friend, or a neighbour. It would contribute to making communities safer, and as such is probably something that local safeguarding boards should be seriously considering. “Cuckooing” is a real threat to public safety, more so due to its stealthy nature, and must not be underestimated, especially given its rapid growth.

**Kevin Sheridan, Chair**

January 2023