



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Collegian

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/colegn](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/colegn)

Research paper

# Are we prepared? Academic readiness to recognise and respond to drug-related criminal exploitation in healthcare education: A cross-sectional survey study



Tracy Hincks <sup>a,\*</sup>, Rebecca Gee <sup>a</sup>, Jennifer Germain <sup>b</sup>, Claire Hanlon <sup>c</sup>, Katie Edwards <sup>a</sup>, Rachel Howard <sup>a</sup>, Noeleen Ryan <sup>a</sup>, Oladayo Bifarin <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Nursing and Advanced Practice, Faculty of Health, Innovation, Technology and Science, Liverpool John Moores University, Tithebarn Building, 79 Tithebarn Street, Liverpool L2 2ER, UK

<sup>b</sup> Public Health Institute, Faculty of Health, Innovation, Technology and Science, Liverpool John Moores University, Exchange Station, Tithebarn Street, Liverpool L2 2QP, UK

<sup>c</sup> School of Psychology, Faculty of Health, Innovation, Technology and Science, Liverpool John Moores University, Tom Reilly Building, Byrom Street, Liverpool L3 3EF, UK

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 28 July 2025

Received in revised form 11 November 2025

Accepted 6 January 2026

### Keywords:

County lines

Health

Criminal exploitation

University students

Education

Training

Academic staff

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Drug exploitation is a concern in UK higher education. While healthcare academic staff are well placed to support at-risk students, little is known about their knowledge, preparedness, or wider support. **Purpose:** Explore healthcare academic staff's knowledge and practices regarding drug-related criminal exploitation.

**Method:** An online survey collected a combination of qualitative and quantitative data (N = 89). Descriptive statistical analysis and content analysis were used. The survey was distributed to health-based academic staff at a University in England.

**Findings:** Participants (87%) believed that it was their role to support students at risk of drug exploitation, yet only 17% had received training, and 6% were aware of university policy. There was support for training, clearer referral guidance, and the integration of drug-related criminal exploitation content into curricula.

**Discussion:** Academic staff are motivated but underprepared to respond to drug-related criminal exploitation. Universities must implement structured training, safeguarding policies, and curricular integration.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd on behalf of Australian College of Nursing Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

### Summary of relevance

#### Problem or Issue

UK higher-education staff recognise a duty to safeguard students vulnerable to drug-related criminal exploitation, yet training is limited, and awareness of university policy is poor, leaving many students at risk.

#### What is already known

Criminal exploitation involving drugs, violence, and trafficking, known as 'County Lines' in the UK, is a global issue. University students, facing financial hardship or isolation, are increasingly targeted. Academic staff are well placed to help, but evidence on their preparedness, training, and confidence is scarce.

#### What this paper adds

It identifies key barriers such as policy ambiguity, inconsistent curriculum, and unmet training needs, and recommends targeted, discipline-specific training, clearer policy communication, and integration into curricula.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [T.Hincks@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:T.Hincks@ljmu.ac.uk) (T. Hincks).

## 1. Introduction

County Lines criminal exploitation is a model of illicit drug trafficking where urban gangs extend their operations into rural or coastal towns, using dedicated mobile phone lines, often referred to as 'deal lines' (National Crime Agency, 2018; Shaw, 2024). While the term 'County Lines' is unique to the UK, the situation is not. County Line criminal exploitation is more commonly called drug trafficking outside of the UK; however, a similar model of exploitation is adopted. In Europe, drug trafficking networks often operate across borders, involving multiple countries and utilising various strategies to distribute drugs (European Commission, 2025).

County Lines criminal exploitation is a major issue involving drugs, violence, gangs, criminal and sexual exploitation, trafficking, modern slavery and is a major safeguarding and public health concern (Home Office, 2018). County Lines criminal exploitation correlates with poor outcomes such as low educational attainment and poor physical and emotional health; therefore, by addressing County Line criminal exploitation risk factors, interventions can bring wider benefits (Hesketh, 2021; Pitts, 2020; Windle et al., 2020; Government, 2018; Hudek, 2018; Public Health England, 2021; Turner et al., 2019).

Gangs groom children, young people, and vulnerable adults through promises of money or a sense of belonging, only to later coerce them into criminal activities (Robinson, McLean, & Densley, 2019). Control is maintained through manipulation, financial incentives, and fostering drug dependency (Spicer, Moyle, & Coomber, 2020). A defining feature of County Lines criminal exploitation is the use of distinctive strategies such as 'cuckooing', a practice where drug gangs take over the homes of their victims for their illicit operations (Moyle, 2019; Spicer, 2021). This not only puts the victim at risk but also affects communities adversely (National Police Chiefs Council, 2024). As such, the National Crime Agency (NCA) highlighted that County Lines criminal exploitation is closely linked to modern slavery, trafficking, and child criminal exploitation (National Crime Agency, 2019) with significant international implications (Spicer et al., 2020).

In response to the growing threat of County Lines criminal exploitation, the UK government and police agencies have implemented a range of measures. In 2018, the National County Lines Coordination Centre (NCLCC) was established to provide a unified approach to tackling this issue (Home Office, 2018) to share intelligence and coordinate operations. The NCLCC unites the NCA, regional organised crime units, and other collaborators to exchange intelligence and coordinate efforts.

In 2025, the UK government introduced new laws making County Lines criminal exploitation a specific offence with a consequence of a 10-year prison sentence. The same law includes the use of 'cuckooing' with a sentence time of five years in prison (Home Office, 2025). Furthermore, child criminal exploitation prevention orders can restrict suspected groomers from working with children and restrict their association with people and geographical areas.

Despite strict measures from law enforcement agencies on County Lines criminal exploitation perpetrators and support for victims, there remains a dearth of evidence around this phenomenon of interest (Bonning & Cleaver, 2021). However, research across six English locations has been instrumental in mapping practices like commuting and cuckooing (Coomber & Moyle, 2018), and Robinson et al. (2019) found evidence of coercive exploitation and voluntary participation among young people.

A prominent feature of County Lines criminal operations is the exploitation of vulnerable individuals, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Hesketh, 2021; Hudek, 2018; Pitts, 2020; Windle et al., 2020). Spicer et al. (2020) highlight that perpetrators often exploit specific vulnerabilities of children and young people, including experiences of trauma, poverty, neglect, and family instability. While these risk factors are well-documented in children and young people, similar susceptibilities may exist amongst

university students. There is growing evidence that to avoid detection, perpetrators are targeting people from more affluent areas, often referred to as 'clean skins' (National Crime Agency, 2018). Hall, Khan, and Eslea (2022) and Burt, Payne, and Stubbings (2024) identify concern that university students are at risk of drug-related exploitation, such as County Lines criminal exploitation, as the pressures of academic life, financial strain, social isolation, and mental health challenges can make them susceptible to being targeted. Meredith, Davies, Stubbings, and Payne (2025) concur, adding concern regarding the increased risk and availability of illicit drugs in universities, alongside students having more opportunities to use them due to living away from home and attending places associated with substance misuse. Furthermore, they argue that this can increase the risk of County Lines criminal exploitation among university students. Moyle and Coomber (2018) reported that there is a prevalent risk of university students transitioning from drug use into the supply of drugs. However, there is a paucity of research in this area.

This study explores healthcare-related academic staff at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the North-West of England and their knowledge of identifying and responding to students who may be vulnerable to County Lines criminal exploitation.

The objective of this study is to provide key recommendations for higher education research and policy by exploring the knowledge and practices of academic staff in recognising and responding to students who may be at risk of County Lines criminal exploitation. By exploring institutional barriers to effective safeguarding responses and addressing knowledge gaps, the evidence gathered will contribute to the development of teaching practices, inform policy, strengthen mandatory training, and improve overall student support mechanisms.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research design

This study explores how healthcare-related academic staff at a North-West England university understand and respond to County Lines criminal exploitation. The survey questions aimed to assess academics' knowledge, their experiences in identifying and supporting County Lines criminal exploitation in the student population, their teaching practices relating to County Lines, and what additional support or training they felt they needed. The survey was initially developed by the lead researcher (TH) following consultation from the wider research team. It aimed to capture four distinct elements: (i) participant demographics, (ii) current knowledge of county line criminal exploitation, (iii) teaching practices, and (iv) additional support required. It was piloted across the authors' networks and checked for clarity. Data were collected through an online survey. Surveys can help reduce geographical dependence and increase the validity and reliability of the study. Using online surveys can ensure that the study is reproducible and of high quality. A Checklist for Reporting of Survey Studies (CROSS) was referred to throughout the study to ensure credibility (Sharma et al., 2021).

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected through the online survey. Quantitative data were collected through Likert-scale survey questions assessing awareness, confidence, and perceived preparedness, while qualitative insights were drawn from open-ended responses. Combining the breadth of quantitative data with the depth of qualitative responses is beneficial for the study, as it allows the measurement of awareness and exploration of personal perspectives. Additionally, this approach can provide standardised responses, reduce variability in interpretation, and ensure that the study can be replicated. Furthermore, open-ended questions can reveal inconsistencies or clarify ambiguous responses, enhancing content validity by capturing nuanced insights and unexpected themes (Kelley, Clark, Brown, & Sitzia, 2003).

Influenced by the Knowledge-to-Action (KTA) framework (Field, Booth, Ilott, & Gerrish, 2014), the study proffers key recommendations for how academic knowledge translates into safeguarding and teaching practice, with the goal of enhancing institutional responses and interdisciplinary engagement.

To test the clarity and validity of the online survey, a pilot survey was completed by the research team, including academic staff with subject matter experience and an understanding of the target population. Following the pilot survey, research discussions, and feedback, the survey was refined to address ambiguous or leading questions, technical issues, and logic errors (Muasya & Mulwa, 2023; Pearson et al., 2020). Muasya and Mulwa (2023) highlight the importance of undertaking a pilot study to review research instruments to enhance the reliability and validity of the data. They go on to suggest that this enables the identification of potential problems before embarking on the actual research; otherwise, it could affect the outcome of the main research. Data collected from the pilot survey were disregarded and not used in the final data to avoid contaminating the research findings.

The research team comprises nurse academics who also have clinical experience working with children and young adults who might be at risk of County Lines exploitation, as well as research experts from across psychology, nursing, and public health.

Ethical approval was granted by the University (ref:24/NAH/011). To ensure ethical standards were adhered to and participants were fully informed before they completed the survey, a participation information document that clearly explained how the survey data would be stored, utilised, and protected was provided. Informed consent was obtained, and to protect anonymity, no identifiable data were collected. An anonymous link to the survey was sent rather than personal invitations. The online survey platform (JISC) is GDPR compliant and ensures that data are encrypted and password-protected. Once the survey was closed, the data were downloaded and stored on university password-protected computers.

## 2.2. Participants

Convenience sampling was adopted for recruitment. Emails were sent to an institution's distribution mailing lists, inviting eligible health care staff aged 18 and over with teaching responsibility (i.e., some level of engagement with students) to participate. Out of the 300 eligible staff, 89 took part (30%), and all participants completed each element.

## 2.3. Data collection

The online survey took around 15–20 minutes to complete and was conducted between October 2024 and January 2025. It consisted of 33 questions, with a mix of closed and open-ended questions to explore participants' knowledge and practices with regard to supporting students who might be at risk of County Lines criminal exploitation. Demographic questions were included at the beginning to identify varying levels of each of these factors among participants based on factors such as sex, age, length of employment, discipline, and role type. To prevent multiple participation to maintain integrity, the JISC online survey platform was used, as it is effective in identifying duplicates.

## 2.4. Data analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis of the quantitative data was conducted in Microsoft Excel (initial data cleaning) and IBM SPSS v29 (descriptive analysis). Quantitative analysis was conducted by one author (JG) and checked for accuracy by all other authors. Qualitative open-text responses were collated into Microsoft Word and analysed using content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Initial coding was conducted by one author (CH); during a full research team meeting,

**Table 1**  
Demographics.

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	70	79
Male	18	20
Prefer not to say	1	1
Age group		
18–29 years	2	2
30–39 years	30	34
40–49 years	31	35
50–59 years	21	24
60–69 years	5	6
Discipline		
Nursing	58	65
Psychology	14	16
Public Health	17	19
Years working in academia		
Less than 1 year	21	24
1–3 years	30	34
4–6 years	16	18
7–10 years	9	10
More than 10 years	13	15
Job role		
Lecturer	22	25
Other researcher/academic role	12	13
Reader/Professor	6	7
Senior lecturer	49	55

codes were discussed, reviewed, labelled, and grouped into categories comprising related themes and patterns. Reflexivity was actively integrated into the research process through these team discussions, where researchers critically reflected on their own biases, assumptions, and potential influence on data interpretation (Olmos-Vega, Stalmeijer, Varpio, & Kahlke, 2023). The team engaged in reflexive dialogues to examine how personal perspectives might shape coding decisions and theme development, ensuring a more balanced analysis. Qualitative data were used primarily to complement the quantitative findings, with quotes used as illustrations throughout the results section.

## 3. Results

Survey respondents were all academic staff teaching and working at a health-based faculty within a university. Most survey respondents were women (n = 70; 79%) and aged between 30 and 59 years (n = 82; 92%) (Table 1). The majority were working and teaching within nursing and related disciplines (n = 58; 65%), and the highest proportion (n = 30; 34%) had been working within academia for between one and three years. Most respondents were either lecturers (n = 22; 25%) or senior lecturers (n = 49; 55%).

### 3.1. Existing County Lines knowledge and training gap

Overall, participants reported being either very familiar (n = 26; 29%) or familiar (n = 34; 38%) with the term 'County Lines'; however, only 15 (17%) participants reported having received any related training. Of those who had received training, all reported the provider as external to the University in which they worked.

Out of the 15 participants who had received County Lines training, most received it from the NHS (n = 8), while others were trained by the police (n = 3) or as part of safeguarding related to their job roles, such as within local authorities. When asked how training was delivered, 73% (n = 11) stated that it was in person, with 20% (n = 3) receiving online training, and one receiving both types. Duration of County Lines training previously received by participants varied from less than one hour to a full day, with one participant stating they received "multiple sessions covering about 8 hours of content" (P11).

**Table 2**  
County Lines familiarity.

	Very familiar	Familiar	Heard the term but not familiar	Not familiar/ unsure
Gender				
Female	33%	36%	21%	10%
Male	17%	44%	39%	0%
Prefer not to say	0%	100%	0%	0%
Age group				
18–29 years	0%	50%	0%	50%
30–39 years	27%	27%	37%	10%
40–49 years	29%	42%	23%	6%
50–59 years	33%	52%	10%	5%
60–69 years	40%	20%	40%	0%
Discipline				
Nursing	21%	43%	29%	7%
Psychology	7%	36%	36%	21%
Public Health	76%	24%	0%	0%
Years working in academia				
Less than 1 year	10%	38%	33%	19%
1–3 years	23%	43%	30%	3%
4–6 years	31%	31%	31%	6%
7–10 years	33%	56%	11%	0%
More than 10 years	69%	23%	0%	8%
Job role				
Lecturer	14%	36%	32%	18%
Other researcher/ academic	67%	25%	8%	0%
Reader/Professor	33%	67%	0%	0%
Senior lecturer	27%	39%	29%	6%

Participants referred to how training received could be improved, describing a preference for content to be “*more in-depth*” (P10), focussed solely upon County Lines exploitation (n = 4), provide advice on how to signpost students to appropriate support (n = 3), for example, “*advice on what to do if suspect an issue.*” (P8)), and how to train future health professionals:

*“It is essential to my programme, given that I am teaching children’s nurses and professional staff who are the first point of contact for children and young people.”*

Frequency of training was highlighted by participants who suggested that training should be delivered routinely rather than as a stand-alone, one-off training session; “*Repeated more frequently – often seen as a tick box exercise, flavour of the month*” (P14).

Knowledge was impacted by participants’ discipline, with 100% of public health staff being at least familiar with the term ‘County Lines’, compared to 64% of nursing staff and 43% of psychology staff (Table 2). A similar split was seen by job type, with 100% of professors and readers and 92% of other research staff being at least familiar with the term, compared to 50% of lecturers and 65% of senior lecturers. Often, those who had worked within academia for longer periods were more likely to be aware of the term ‘County Lines’. Similarly, knowledge generally increased with age up until the 50- to 59-year age group (86% being familiar or very familiar) compared to 50% of those aged 18–29 years.

### 3.2. Teaching County Lines criminal exploitation

Only 7% of staff reported teaching content to students on County Lines exploitation (e.g., “*As part of a module on drug policy and practice*” [P1]), with 27% of those teaching the topic having received no training themselves. Despite this, most participants (83%) believed that students should receive lessons on the topic (94% nursing, 76% public health, 43% psychology), and 71% were at least somewhat concerned about the risks of County Lines exploitation

within university students (83% nursing, 65% public health, 29% psychology).

Participants perceived that teaching County Lines content could increase awareness among students (n = 40), describing this as being positive, as possession of this knowledge could allow students to safeguard themselves and/or others against exploitation. One comment highlighted how they think it is important that all students are aware of the implications of County Lines and how to look after themselves and their friends if they are worried about them” (P21).

Students may be perceived as ‘vulnerable’ by criminal organisations, through “*being away from home, could have financial issues, making new friends...*” (P10). Others expressed that County Lines should be taught to students where the topic is relevant (n = 28). Participants recognised the importance of teaching County Lines to those wishing to enter specific professions, who may encounter these issues within their role.

*“[it is] important that students understand the issue as many are on professional programmes which may mean they come into contact with those who may be at risk.”* (P6).

However, some participants felt that the decision to raise awareness needed to be balanced against the risks of increased harm for students in identifying and responding to potential exploitation by their peers.

*“Pros is that students would be aware, and all knowledge is good for students! Cons is that, allowing students to recognise this act may put them at risk. What happens if they see this happening? Would students be informed of how to keep themselves and others safe?”* (P73).

Training was identified as a key requirement to enable staff to feel ‘confident’ to deliver County Lines criminal exploitation teaching (n = 42). Respondents suggested a “*formal training package for staff so they are confident in teaching the subject*” (P8), which some felt should be “*mandatory*” and could be delivered either online or in-person. Expertise and subject specialism (n = 11) in County Lines exploitation was also perceived as necessary for teaching County Lines criminal exploitation to students to deliver high-quality teaching and learning in this area. Here, participants recommended that “*a learning needs analysis and identification of members of the team to roll out teaching would ensure quality provision*” (P61) and that this required “*staff qualified to do the teaching and map it into the curriculum*” (P26). Others suggested that including professional experts, such as police, within the field of County Lines criminal exploitation would be required and enhance teaching and learning for students (n = 12), as well as those with lived experience (n = 8) to deliver County Lines content that reflects authentic experiences with a focus on how individuals have recovered from County Lines criminal exploitation. Here, one participant commented that “*the voices of lived experience alongside might be important here, as well as pathways out of drug-related activity*” (P62). Additionally, lecture content (n = 14) with a focus upon production of County Lines specific teaching and learning resources such as “*case studies*” and “*teaching resources*” with “*a clear and practical curriculum about the definition and how to seek support*” (P77) was considered optimal.

### 3.3. Embedding County Lines criminal exploitation support within higher education

Critically, 87% felt that recognising and supporting students at risk or involved in County Lines criminal exploitation was part of their role, although again this was split by discipline (91% nursing, 82% public health, 71% psychology); however, only 6% of staff knew of any university policies or processes to support with this, and none had ever referred a student to support services due to concerns. Of those participants commenting on what procedures were in place at

the institution, many described being unsure, but went on to assume that this would fall under existing safeguarding policy ( $n = 3$ ). However, others could not find explicit reference within the existing safeguarding policy, emphasising the need for clearer university-wide guidance and policy.

*"I am aware of the safeguarding policy and how to escalate a concern about a vulnerable adult, however I couldn't find any reference to County Lines exploitation specifically."* (P3)

Finally, 88% of respondents agreed that more training was required to support staff in supporting students potentially at risk from County Lines criminal exploitation. It was perceived that training would increase knowledge and awareness among staff, helping them identify students at risk of County Lines criminal exploitation and provide them with relevant information on where to signpost students to receive appropriate support:

*"Help with informing staff what it is, the risks involved and how to spot "at risk" behaviours"* (P32)

*"Staff like me who have not much awareness about County Lines, it might be helpful to have some training to help support/signpost students in the right direction."* (P28)

Participants gave feedback on how training could be delivered ( $n = 13$ ), with some suggesting "staff should attend yearly mandatory training" (P6), "online e-learning (P2)", and "face-to-face safeguarding training based on local policies and support services" (P9). Whilst the question asked specifically about training for academic staff to better support students who may be at risk from exploitation, some respondents made suggestions for suitable training environments whereby staff increase students' County Lines knowledge, for example, through personal tutor sessions:

*"All lecturer/senior lecturers conduct personal tutorials with students; they are in an ideal situation in smaller programmes to develop a rapport with students"* (P40).

Four participants suggested the paucity of awareness in this area meant that "any kind of training would be useful" (P20). This suggests that staff perceive they lack understanding of this issue and how to appropriately support students who are experiencing or have experienced County Lines criminal exploitation. Interestingly, when staff were asked for their comments on how to better address County Lines exploitation at the University, some felt it would be helpful to have a grasp of the extent of County Lines exploitation ( $n = 4$ ), suggesting that this would enable staff to prioritise whether this is an issue that warrants further attention:

*"I think it would be helpful to know stats on how many [University Name] students are involved in this or at risk"* (P11).

Nevertheless, the need for awareness raising ( $n = 4$ ) and training ( $n = 5$ ) was often perceived as necessary among those who responded to this question ( $n = 17$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first UK study to explore healthcare-related university academic staff's knowledge, awareness, and practices regarding County Lines criminal exploitation. The study aimed to explore current levels of understanding in recognising and responding to County Lines criminal exploitation among university students and explore training needs among academic staff. Key findings showed that while staff are generally familiar with the term County Lines criminal exploitation, formal training is limited, internal policies are poorly understood, and confidence to respond appropriately is low.

There is growing evidence suggesting that County Lines criminal exploitation has been, and is, currently happening in the university population (Boden & Day, 2023; Hall et al., 2022). Academic staff in higher education are in a critical position to identify early warning signs and intervene appropriately, provided they have the required knowledge and institutional backing. Therefore, universities must acknowledge that County Lines criminal exploitation is a legitimate risk and take proactive measures to safeguard students at university.

The findings of this study illustrate that there is concern among academics about the risk of County Lines criminal exploitation among university students, with 71% of respondents being somewhat concerned. This supports Burt et al.'s (2024) findings of the need for universities to increase their awareness of County Lines criminal exploitation, recognising the associated harms and tactics used by perpetrators. Concerningly, there is little evidence to suggest a cohesive approach to teaching County Lines criminal exploitation throughout HEIs.

Encouragingly, most participants believed that supporting students at risk was part of their role and expressed a desire for more comprehensive training and guidance. This is particularly poignant when considered against wider contextual factors, for example, students' drug use in university is increasing and becoming more normalised (Boden & Day, 2023).

The findings highlight a gap between perceived responsibility and institutional support. Although 87% of staff felt that it was within their remit to support students at risk, only 6% were aware of relevant university policies, and none had made referrals. This disconnect suggests a need for clearer safeguarding frameworks and communication within HEIs. Increasingly, HEIs are viewed as having a moral or potentially legal responsibility to ensure student well-being. The concept of a university's 'duty of care' has become a significant national discussion, driven by student tragedies, a rise in poor student mental health, and calls for systemic reform (Safeguarding, 2025).

The discrepancy in awareness by academic rank and discipline, where professors were more aware than lecturers with greater student contact, indicates the need for targeted interventions for academic staff to ensure they are prepared and equipped with relevant information to support students at risk or experiencing County Lines criminal exploitation.

Most respondents agreed that more training is required. This is consistent with previous research; Hall et al. (2022) identified that there is a need to educate staff and students on the signs and risks of County Lines criminal exploitation and recommended that university staff should receive training. It was emphasised in the results that there is a need for clearer university-wide guidance and policy on how to respond and support students at risk.

Alongside the importance of academics having knowledge and confidence in identifying and responding to students at risk of County Lines criminal exploitation, the minimal inclusion of County Lines criminal exploitation content in teaching is concerning, despite widespread agreement that it should be part of the curriculum. This also reinforces the importance of equipping academic educators with the knowledge and tools to deliver this content effectively and safely to students in a university. However, evidence is mixed on what works best here; further pedagogical research is needed in this area (Hayman, Stubbings, Davies, & Payne, 2024).

Interestingly, most respondents believed that students should be taught about County Lines criminal exploitation, perceiving that teaching content could increase knowledge and awareness among students, enabling students to safeguard themselves and/or others against exploitation, and this is supported by Wigmore (2018) and Windle et al. (2020). However, only 7% of staff across nursing, public health, and psychology reported teaching County Lines criminal exploitation content, and 27% of those teaching the content had not received any training themselves. Other respondents expressed that

it should be taught to students only on relevant programmes, that is, those students entering specific professions, for example, nursing, where they may encounter County Lines criminal exploitation within their professions or communities.

To turn the observed role-preparedness gap into tangible practice change, we adopted the KTA framework as a key driver for knowledge mobilisation. Diagnosis at the *Identify* stage showed strong perceived responsibility (87%) but thin capability (training 17%, policy awareness 6%) and uneven familiarity by role and discipline; this makes the case for targeted, role-sensitive change rather than generic awareness activity.

Through the *Knowledge Adaption* stage, there is a need to develop locally grounded, County Lines criminal exploitation-specific pathways that match role demands, including foundational, skills-based training for academic staff, especially lecturers and newer staff. In situ, advanced application-focused modules for public health and senior/research roles. There is also a need to make practice expectations explicit (i.e., who notices, who decides, and how to escalate) and to codify these as a visible standard operating procedure with signposting maps and case-based resources, so that the 'next action' is unambiguous in real settings.

At the *Implementation* stage, it will be crucial to embed these expectations where work already happens by integrating content into curricula and staff onboarding (given that only 7% currently teach it). Completion of such activities should be required before delivering related teaching, and use personal tutors to rehearse safe conversations and referral steps. Involving recognised experts and lived-experience voices to anchor decisions in practical realities would provide confidence and promote consistency.

For the *Monitor and Evaluate* outcome stage, it will be important to track a small set of role-coded indicators such as training completion, curriculum coverage, use of signposting routes, and help-seeking/referral activity, alongside changes in familiarity, confidence, and policy navigation over time. By sharing simple dashboards with programme teams and running brief feedback huddles, and pairing this with local prevalence data, efforts can be focused where preparedness is lowest, and improvement is most needed.

To the *Sustain knowledge use* stage, instituting annual refreshers, keeping quick-reference guides highly visible, and linking completion and safe-practice behaviours to routine quality assurance and appraisal will be essential.

By adopting the KTA framework as a series of aligned sequences, we aim to convert perceived responsibility into observable behaviour change, provide more accurate identification, earlier signposting and referrals, and safer student outcomes, while steadily narrowing disparities in preparedness across roles and disciplines.

## 5. Strengths and limitations

This study contributes original evidence to an under-researched area by focusing on healthcare academics in a UK university setting. Its use of a study design that collects quantitative Likert-scale items and open-ended survey questions offered both breadth and depth in understanding staff perspectives. Online surveys are cost-effective, time-efficient, and useful in research conducted in university settings where people are digitally connected; however, it is important to consider that sampling bias excludes individuals who do not have digital literacy. Additionally, online surveys can also have lower response rates, and they do not allow individuals to ask for clarification, which may impact data quality (Wright, 2005).

The study is limited by its sample size ( $n = 89$ ), drawn from a single institution, which may affect generalisability. Nonetheless, the findings lay important groundwork for further research on academic preparedness for safeguarding in higher education. The research team was multidisciplinary in nature, with researchers from differing backgrounds and expertise providing contextual sensitivity

and study interpretation. The research team met regularly to engage in reflexive practice to ensure that interpretations were founded on evidence and not assumptions.

Data were not collected on additional demographics such as ethnicity or socio-economic status. Whilst there are links between exploitation, marginalisation, and disadvantage, this survey was not aimed at those deemed to be at potential risk of involvement in County Lines criminal exploitation. Furthermore, collecting additional data in combination with demographics may have risked identification of participants to the research team; future research with those who may be at risk may consider the collection of this information.

## 6. Recommendations

The findings support the need for higher educational institutions to increase their awareness of County Lines criminal exploitation, the associated harms, and the tactics used by offenders. Increasing knowledge among staff at HEIs on how to recognise and respond to students at risk of, or involved in, County Lines criminal exploitation, training, policy, and process awareness will be advantageous to increase the chances of recognising and supporting students. It is essential that when criminal exploitation is suspected, the appropriate safeguarding procedure should be followed and students offered support from the appropriate services (Bennett & Holloway, 2014; Safeguarding, 2025).

Although academic staff are well placed to identify and respond to students at risk of County Lines criminal exploitation, universities must position safeguarding as a supported and shared responsibility, not an added workload. Academic staff are already stretched with teaching, research, and pastoral care duties, so expecting them to address complex safeguarding issues such as County Lines criminal exploitation without support risks burnout and inconsistent responses (Douglas, Pattison, Warren, & Karanika-Murray, 2025). Instead, institutions should provide clear referral pathways, embedded training during induction and professional development, and easy-to-access toolkits with scenario-based guidance. For instance, short, role-specific e-learning modules and in-person briefings at the start of the academic year can increase staff confidence without being time-intensive. Embedding safeguarding liaisons or named points of contact within each faculty could also ensure staff feel supported when raising concerns. This approach respects existing pressures, while equipping staff with the knowledge and tools needed to act confidently when they suspect a student is at risk.

Universities should develop clear, accessible policies that explicitly reference County Lines criminal exploitation, and embed safeguarding training into regular academic development programmes. Training should be discipline-specific, ongoing rather than one-off, and supported by practical tools and resources. For policy-makers, there is an urgent need to standardise County Lines criminal exploitation safeguarding requirements in higher education, akin to existing responsibilities in schools and healthcare (Home Office, 2023). National and International guidance on supporting exploited students in universities should be developed to ensure consistency and accountability.

## 7. Conclusion

This study provides important insight into how healthcare-related academic staff in higher education perceive and respond to County Lines criminal exploitation. While awareness of the issue was relatively high among participants, this did not translate into consistent training, policy knowledge, or confidence in recognising and responding to students at risk. The overwhelming majority of participants considered safeguarding to be within their professional

remit, yet most lacked access to university-led training or clear guidance on how to take appropriate action.

The findings highlight that academic staff do not require more responsibilities; they need more support. Institutions must invest in clear referral pathways, role-specific safeguarding guidance, and regular, accessible training that fits within the realities of academic workloads. Embedding drug-related criminal exploitation awareness into induction, professional development, and curriculum content, particularly in health-related programmes, will better equip both staff and students to understand and respond to exploitation risks.

This study also revealed differences in awareness across disciplines and academic roles, suggesting that tailored approaches may be needed to reach all staff effectively.

Given the rising concern about drug-related criminal exploitation, such as County Lines, in university contexts, this study serves as a timely call for action. Future research should expand across multiple institutions and include in-depth qualitative exploration to further inform policy, education, and safeguarding practices in higher education.

### Authorship contribution statement

**Tracy Hincks:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft. **Rebecca Gee:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft. **Jennifer Germain:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Claire Hanlon:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Katie Edwards:** Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Rachel Howard:** Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Noeleen Ryan:** Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Oladayo Bifarin:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

### Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### Ethical statement

Human participants completed the online survey.  
Ethical approval was granted by University Ethics was granted.  
Approval number (24/NAH/011).  
Date of approval – 27th August 2024.

### Conflict of interest

Oladayo Bifarin is a National Institute for Health and Care Senior Research Leader. The views expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care. There is no further declaration of interests to declare.

### Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.colegn.2026.01.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.colegn.2026.01.001).

### References

- Bennett, T. H., & Holloway, K. R. (2014). Drug misuse among university students in the UK: implications for prevention. *Substance Use and Misuse*, 49, 448–455. <https://doi.org/10.3109/10826084.2013.846378>
- Boden, M., & Day, E. (2023). Illicit drug use in university students in the UK and Ireland: a PRISMA-guided scoping review. *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy*, 18, Article 18. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13011-023-00526-1>
- Bonning, J., & Cleaver, K. (2021). "There is no "war on drugs"": an investigation into county line drug networks from the perspective of a London borough. *The Police Journal*, 94, 443–461.

- Burt, A. M., Payne, L., & Stubbings, D. R. (2024). Flying under the radar: how susceptible are university students to County Lines victimization? *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 68, 785–805.
- Coomber, R., & Moyle, L. (2018). The changing shape of street-level heroin and crack supply in England: commuting, holidaying and cuckooing drug dealers across 'county lines'. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 58, 1323–1342.
- Douglas, V., Pattison, N., Warren, K., & Karanika-Murray, M. (2025). Wellbeing in the higher education sector: a qualitative study of staff perceptions in UK universities. *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health*, 40, 135–158.
- European Commission (2025). *Migration and Home Affairs*. News report shows how the organised crime is changing and effecting EU security. Available from: (<https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/new-report-shows-how-organised-crime-changing-and-effecting-eu-security-2025-03-21>). (Accessed 27th June 2025).
- Field, B., Booth, A., Ilott, I., & Gerrish, K. (2014). Using the Knowledge to Action Framework in practice: a citation analysis and systematic review. *Implementation Science*, 9, Article 172.
- Hall, B., Khan, R., & Eslea, M.J. (2022). County lines & criminal exploitation of UK university students. <https://knowledge.lancashire.ac.uk/id/eprint/42209/1/County%20Lines%20%26%20Criminal%20Exploitation%20of%20UK%20University%20Students.pdf> (Accessed 27th June 2025).
- Hayman, C.-M., Stubbings, D. R., Davies, J. L., & Payne, L. (2024). Can education influence the public's vulnerability to county lines? *Crime Prevention and Community Safety*, 26, 28–46.
- Hesketh, R. F. (2021). Its scouse soldier's lad init! An examination of modern Urban street gangs on Merseyside. *Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice*, 7, 355–372.
- HM Government (2018). *Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County lines guidance*. Available from: ([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65322ad1e839fd001486720d/2023\\_FOR\\_PUBLICATION\\_-\\_Criminal\\_exploitation\\_of\\_children\\_young\\_people\\_and\\_vulnerable\\_adults\\_county\\_lines1.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65322ad1e839fd001486720d/2023_FOR_PUBLICATION_-_Criminal_exploitation_of_children_young_people_and_vulnerable_adults_county_lines1.pdf)). (Accessed 27th June 2025).
- Home Office (2018). *National County Lines Coordination Centre to crack down on drug gangs*. Available from: (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/national-county-lines-coordination-centre-to-crack-down-on-drug-gangs>). (Accessed 27th June 2025).
- Home Office (2023). *Criminal exploitation of children, young people and vulnerable adults County lines*. Available from: (<https://gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines>). (Accessed 27th June 2025).
- Home Office (2025). *Crime and Policing Bill: child criminal exploitation, cuckooing (home takeover) and coerced internal concealment factsheet*. Available from: (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/crime-and-policing-bill-2025-factsheets/crime-and-policing-bill-child-criminal-exploitation-and-cuckooing-factsheet>). (Accessed 27th June 2025).
- Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15, 1277–1288.
- Hudek, J. (2018). *County lines: scoping report*. London: St Giles Trust. *County-Lines-Demonstration-Pilot-Evaluation-Report-May-2018-designed.pdf* (Accessed 27th June 2025).
- Kelley, K., Clark, B., Brown, V., & Sitzia, J. (2003). Good practice in the conduct and reporting of survey research. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 15, 261–266.
- Meredith, I., Davies, J. L., Stubbings, D., & Payne, L. (2025). Unsuspectingly vulnerable: a rapid evidence assessment on the vulnerability of university students to criminal exploitation. 0306624x251329944 *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X251329944> SAGE publications.
- Moyle, L. (2019). Situating vulnerability and exploitation in street-level drug markets: cuckooing, commuting, and the "County Lines" drug supply model. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 49, 739–755.
- Moyle, L., & Coomber, R. (2018). Student transitions into drug supply: exploring the university as a 'risk environment'. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 22, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2018.1529863>
- Muasya, J. N., & Mulwa, P. (2023). Pilot study, a neglected part of qualitative and quantitative research process: evidence from selected PhD thesis and dissertations. *Higher Education Research*, 8, 115–123.
- National Crime Agency (2018). *National County Lines Coordination Centre to crack down on drug gangs*. Available from: (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/national-county-lines-coordination-centre-to-crack-down-on-drug-gangs>). (Accessed 27th June 2025).
- National Crime Agency (2019). *County Lines drug supply, vulnerability and harm 2018*. Available from: (<https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/257-county-lines-drug-supply-vulnerability-and-harm-2018>). (Accessed 27th June 2025).
- National Police Chiefs Council (2024). *The County Lines Model*. Available from: (<https://www.npcc.police.uk/our-work/work-of-npcc-committees/Crime-Operations-coordination-committee/national-county-lines-co-ordination-centre>). (Accessed 27th June 2025).
- Olmos-Vega, F. M., Stalmeijer, R. E., Varpio, L., & Kahlke, R. (2023). A practical guide to reflexivity in qualitative research: AMEE Guide No. 149. *Medical Teacher*, 45, 241–251.
- Pearson, N., Naylor, P.-J., Ashe, M. C., Fernandez, M., Yoong, S. L., & Wolfenden, L. (2020). Guidance for conducting feasibility and pilot studies for implementation trials. *Pilot and Feasibility Studies*, 6, Article 167.
- Pitts, J. (2020). Covid-19, county lines and the seriously "left behind". *Journal of Children's Services*, 15, 209–213.

- Public Health England (2021). *County lines exploitation: Applying All Our Health*. Available from: (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/county-lines-exploitation-applying-all-our-health>).(Accessed 27th June 2025).
- Robinson, G., McLean, R., & Densley, J. (2019). Working county lines: child criminal exploitation and illicit drug dealing in Glasgow and Merseyside. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 63, 694–711.
- Safeguarding H.E. (2025). *Universities and Duty of Care: where are we at in 2025/26?* Available from: (<https://www.safeguardinghe.co.uk/articles/universities-and-duty-of-care-where-are-we-at-in-202526>).(Accessed 27th June 2025).
- Sharma, A., Minh Duc, N. T., Luu Lam Thang, T., Nam, N. H., Ng, S. J., Abbas, K. S., et al. (2021). A consensus-based checklist for reporting of survey studies (CROSS). *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 36, 3179–3187.
- Shaw, J. (2024). Won the battle but lost the war? 'County lines' and the quest for victim status: reflections and challenges. *Youth Justice*, 24, 231–247.
- Spicer, J. (2021). The policing of cuckooing in 'county lines' drug dealing: an ethnographic study of an amplification spiral. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 61, 1390–1406.
- Spicer, J., Moyle, L., & Coomber, R. (2020). The variable and evolving nature of 'cuckooing' as a form of criminal exploitation in street level drug markets. *Trends in Organized Crime*, 23, 301–323.
- Turner, A., Belcher, L., & Pona, I. (2019). *Counting lives: responding to children who are criminally exploited*. Children's society.Counting Lives Report | The Children's Society (Accessed 27th June 2025).
- Wigmore, J. (2018). Recognizing & acting on signs of "County lines" child exploitation: a case study. Niche Health and Social Care Consulting. [recognising-acting-on-signs-of-county-lines.pdf](#) (Accessed 27th June 2025).
- Windle, J., Moyle, L., & Coomber, R. (2020). 'Vulnerable' kids going country: children and young people's involvement in county lines drug dealing. *Youth Justice*, 20, 64–78.
- Wright, K. B. (2005). Researching internet-based populations: advantages and disadvantages of online survey research, online questionnaire authoring software packages, and web survey services. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10, 3.