



KNOW THE SIGNS

YOUR GUIDE TO STAYING SAFE FROM
KNIFE CRIME & COUNTY LINES

1 in 5

teens offered
drugs

43%

knife crimes
by under 25s

3x

higher risk in
deprived areas

A resource for young people — produced in partnership with schools

Key Stage 3 | Ages 11–14

SAFE TOGETHER



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What Is Knife Crime?

Understanding the basics

Knife crime is any offence in which a knife or bladed weapon is involved — whether it is used to threaten someone, cause injury, or is simply carried in a public place. **You do not have to use a knife for it to be a crime.** Simply having one on you without good reason is a criminal offence that can lead to arrest, a criminal record, and up to four years in prison.

49,000+knife offences (England & Wales
2023/24)**244**stabbing deaths (England &
Wales 2023/24)**43%**

of knife offenders are under 25

50%

of victims are under 25

What Counts as Knife Crime?

- Carrying a knife in a public place — even if it is hidden or never used
- Threatening another person with a knife or bladed weapon
- Using a knife to injure or kill someone
- Selling or giving a knife to someone under the age of 18
- Possessing a banned weapon such as a zombie knife, flick knife, or machete

"Every knife carried is a potential life changed forever — for the victim, their family, and the person who chose to carry it."

— Retired Detective, Metropolitan Police Serious Crime Command

The Real Statistics

The numbers you need to know

These are official figures from the UK Government, the Office for National Statistics (ONS), and the Ministry of Justice. Every number represents a real person.

49,265	244	1 in 5	77%
knife offences England & Wales 2023/24	stabbing deaths England & Wales 2023/24	young people say they know someone who carries a knife	of teenage knife carriers say they do it 'for protection'

Knife Offenders by Age Group

Age Group	% of All Knife Offenders
10–17 (children)	8%
18–24	22%
25–34	18%
35–44	10%
45+	6%

Knife Crime Across the UK — Key Figures

Region	Approximate Annual Offences
London (Metropolitan Police)	14,000+
West Midlands	4,200+
Greater Manchester	3,400+
West Yorkshire	2,800+

Source: ONS Crime in England and Wales 2023/24 — open government licenced data (OGL v3.0)

What Is County Lines?

Drug trafficking & exploitation explained

COUNTY LINES IN SIMPLE TERMS

County lines is when criminal gangs use children and vulnerable people to carry drugs from cities into smaller towns and villages. They use a dedicated mobile phone number — the 'line' — to take drug orders, and they use young people to deliver them. **The young people involved are victims of exploitation — not willing criminals. They are being used.**

Key Terms to Know

- **The Line:** A dedicated mobile phone used to take drug orders
- **Cuckooing:** When a gang takes over a vulnerable person's home to deal drugs from
- **Runners:** Young people sent to carry and deliver drugs between locations
- **Plugging:** Concealing drugs on or inside the body to avoid detection
- **Debt bondage:** Fake debts created to trap and control young people

The Scale of the Problem

- 2,000+ county lines active across the UK
- 10,000+ children exploited through county lines each year
- Average age of a child runner: 15 years old
- Estimated £800 million generated by county lines every year
- Networks identified in every region of England and Wales

How Drugs Move — The Route



Young people are used to transport drugs along this route — often using public transport, staying away from home for days at a time.

How County Lines Works

The steps of exploitation

TARGETING

1 Gangs search for young people who appear vulnerable — those who feel lonely, are struggling at school, have been excluded, are in care, or simply want to belong to something.

GROOMING

2 They offer gifts, cash, food, and friendship. They make the young person feel valued, special, and protected. At this point it feels like a genuine friendship.

DEBT BONDAGE

3 The gang invents a 'debt' — claiming the young person owes money for gifts they were given. This is a deliberate trap used to justify controlling them.

RUNNING

4 The young person is sent to deliver drugs in distant towns — often travelling alone overnight by bus or train, missing school and family.

THREATS

5 If they try to leave, they face threats of violence against themselves or their family, increased fake debts, or worse.

TRAPPED

6 The young person feels frightened, isolated, and too ashamed to tell anyone. But they are a victim of crime — and help IS available.

"I thought they were my friends. By the time I understood what was happening, I felt like there was no way out."

— *Survivor of county lines exploitation, aged 16 (identity protected)*

Spot the Signs

Warning signs of exploitation — in yourself and your friends

Signs in a Young Person

- Unexplained money, new phones, or expensive items with no clear source
- Going missing from home or school for periods of time
- Appearing scared, anxious, withdrawn, or unusually quiet
- Being secretive about who they talk to or where they go
- Carrying large amounts of cash or being found with drugs
- Unexplained injuries or a reluctance to discuss them
- Spending time with much older people who are unknown to their family
- Sudden, unexplained changes in mood or behaviour

Signs of County Lines Involvement

- Possessing multiple mobile phones — one may be used for taking orders
- Travelling long distances alone, especially at night or during school time
- Spending time in unfamiliar properties or houses (cuckooing)
- Referring to themselves using terms like 'soldier' or 'worker'
- Being reluctant or afraid to speak with police or adults
- Drug packaging, paraphernalia, or large amounts of cash in their room
- Being contacted late at night or receiving orders to go somewhere immediately
- A sudden new group of much older 'friends'

IF YOU SPOT THESE SIGNS IN YOURSELF OR A FRIEND — TELL A TRUSTED ADULT OR CALL 101

You do not need to be certain. If something feels wrong, trust that feeling and speak up. You will not be in trouble. Telling an adult early could protect your friend from serious harm.

Grooming: How It Starts

Recognising manipulation before it is too late

The Grooming Timeline

Weeks 1–2	First Contact The recruiter makes contact — online, in a park, or through a mutual friend. They are friendly, charming, and unusually interested in you.
Weeks 3–4	Gifts and Attention Food, money, new clothes, or a phone arrive. They make you feel chosen and important. Nothing is asked of you — yet.
Month 2	Isolation They begin to separate you from your real friends and family — 'they don't get you the way I do.' Your support network is weakened.
Month 3	The Ask They introduce the idea of 'just one small task'. They use the gifts as leverage — 'after everything I've done for you...'
Month 4+	Control Fear, debt, and threats become the tools of control. But at every stage, you are the victim. It is never your fault.

Grooming Tactics — What They Actually Sound Like

- **Flattery:** 'You're so mature for your age / so much smarter than your friends'
- **Exclusivity:** 'This is just between us — don't tell anyone else'
- **Normalising:** 'Everyone does this, it's no big deal at all'
- **Guilt:** 'After everything I've done for you, you're letting me down'
- **Threats:** 'If you tell anyone, you'll be the one who gets in trouble'

Real Stories

These are based on real accounts — names and details changed to protect identities

Jordan, 14 — Birmingham

Jordan began getting free trainers and food from an older lad he met at a local park. The man was friendly and never asked for anything. Three weeks later, Jordan was asked to take a package by bus to a town he'd never visited. He was stopped by police at the station. Jordan had no idea he was being used as a runner — but he still received a police caution.

Key lesson: The gifts were bait. Jordan was a victim — but so were the people those drugs reached.

Aisha, 15 — Manchester

Aisha was told she was in a relationship with a 22-year-old man. He gave her gifts, told her he loved her, and gradually separated her from her mother. He then used emotional pressure to persuade Aisha to store drugs in her bedroom. When police searched the house, Aisha's mother lost her tenancy. Aisha blamed herself.

Key lesson: An adult pursuing a relationship with a 15-year-old is grooming. It is never the child's fault.

Liam, 13 — Leeds

Liam was in care and had felt invisible for most of his life. A local gang called him 'fam' and 'bro' and made him feel he had finally found somewhere to belong. He began running drugs between towns. He was eventually found sleeping in a cuckooed property hundreds of miles from home.

Key lesson: Gangs exploit the need to belong. A real family never puts you in danger.

The Impact on Victims

The real cost of knife crime and exploitation

Physical Impact

- Stab wounds can cause permanent disability or disfigurement
- Loss of limbs, organs, or long-term loss of bodily function
- 244 people were killed by knives in England & Wales in 2023/24
- Survivors often face months of painful surgery and recovery
- Many suffer chronic pain and visible scarring for the rest of their lives

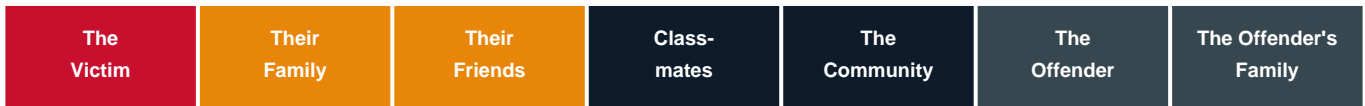
Mental Health Impact

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) — flashbacks, nightmares, panic
- Severe anxiety and panic attacks that prevent normal daily life
- Depression, isolation, and withdrawal from friends and school
- Survivors' guilt when a friend or peer is killed
- Long-term fear of leaving home or returning to familiar places

Community Impact

- Communities where knife crime is frequent experience widespread fear and anxiety
- Local businesses suffer as people avoid areas associated with violence
- Schools face increased pressure to support traumatised young people
- Talented young people are lost — to injury, imprisonment, or death
- The wider community bears the emotional, social, and economic cost of every incident

The Ripple Effect — One Stabbing Affects:



"I thought it was just a scratch. I spent three weeks in hospital. Two years on, I still have nightmares."

— Stabbing survivor, aged 17, London (identity protected)

Why Do Young People Carry Knives?

Understanding the reasons — and why they are wrong

77% **Protection**
Most young people who carry a knife say it is to feel safe. But research shows you are **far more likely to be stabbed if you carry a knife yourself**. Carrying one escalates confrontations rather than preventing them.

34% **Peer Pressure**
'Everyone else has one' — this is almost never true. The majority of young people do **not** carry knives. Gangs and social media create a false impression that it is normal.

18% **Status and Respect**
Some carry knives believing it brings respect. But a reputation built on fear is fragile and short-lived — and is far more likely to end in a prison cell than in genuine respect from anyone.

41% **Anxiety and Fear**
Fear of a particular person, place, or situation. But carrying a knife turns a situation that could be walked away from into one that can become fatal in seconds.

The Protection Myth — The Truth

- Carrying a knife makes you **MORE** likely to be involved in a violent incident — not less
- If you draw a knife, the other person may draw a larger one — situations escalate rapidly
- Police are more likely to stop, search, and arrest people who carry knives
- Even carrying a knife 'just in case' is a criminal offence — up to 4 years in prison
- Walking away is always the safer option. Leaving is strength, not weakness

The Law & Consequences

What the law says — and what happens if you break it

THE LAW IS CLEAR

In England and Wales it is illegal to carry a knife in a public place without a valid reason — even if it is never taken out or used. School grounds, parks, public transport, and the street all count as public places.

Offence	Maximum Penalty
Carrying a bladed weapon in a public place	Up to 4 years in prison and/or unlimited fine
Threatening someone with a knife (over 16 — min. 6 months)	Up to 4 years in prison
Using a knife to injure someone	Up to life imprisonment depending on severity
Selling a knife to someone under 18	Up to 6 months in prison and/or a fine
Possessing a banned weapon (zombie knife, flick knife)	Up to 4 years — no exceptions

Beyond Prison — The Lifelong Consequences

- A criminal record affects your ability to get jobs, travel abroad, and apply to university
- Many careers — including medicine, law, teaching, and the armed forces — are blocked by convictions
- Your family faces stress, shame, and financial cost that can last for years
- A reputation built around violence follows you in your community and online
- A knife conviction at 14 can still be visible to employers when you are 24

Staying Safe Online

How gangs recruit and groom young people through social media

Where Gangs Recruit Online

Instagram	Direct messages used to offer money, status, or vague 'job' opportunities to young people
Snapchat	Disappearing messages used to avoid detection by parents, schools, and police
TikTok	Drill music and gang content used to glamourise criminal lifestyles to young audiences
WhatsApp	Group chats used for giving orders, making threats, and coordinating drug delivery
Discord	Gaming communities used to target isolated young people with few online friends

Red Flags in Online Messages — Never Ignore These

- "I can get you easy money — just carry this one thing for me"
- "Don't tell your parents — they wouldn't understand our friendship"
- "Everyone our age does this, it's totally normal"
- "You're so mature — you're not like other people your age"
- "I'll sort you out with [expensive item] if you help me out just once"

Staying Safe — 5 Golden Rules

- Set all social media accounts to **PRIVATE**
- Never accept direct messages from people you do not know in real life
- Never share your location publicly on any platform
- Tell a trusted adult if anyone online makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe
- Report and block any account that sends messages like the ones above — immediately

How to Say No

Practical strategies for refusing and getting out

Saying no to a gang or to peer pressure can feel impossible — especially when you are being threatened or when you genuinely value the friendship. These are practical strategies that work.

Make an Excuse	You do not owe anyone an explanation. 'I can't — my mum checks my phone' or 'I've got to be somewhere' gives you time and space without confrontation.
Use a Code Word	Agree a secret word with a parent or friend in advance. Sending it means 'come and get me — no questions asked.' Many schools and families support this approach.
Walk Away	Walk — do not run. Running can escalate a situation. Walk calmly toward a public place — a shop, a bus stop, a school — and put distance between yourself and the threat.
Tell Someone	If you have been approached, tell a trusted adult. You will not be in trouble for being targeted. Speaking up early prevents the situation from getting worse.
Call 101 or 999	If you are in immediate danger: call 999. If you want to report something but are safe: call 101 or Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111.
Know Your Rights	If police stop you, stay calm and polite. Give your name and address. You can ask why you are being stopped. You do not have to answer further questions without an adult present.

Who Can You Trust?

Adults and services that are there to help — not judge

Police Officer	Community police officers are trained to support young people. You will not automatically be in trouble for coming forward. Speaking to police early gives you the most protection.
Teacher / Form Tutor	Your school has designated safeguarding leads trained to help you. They understand these situations and can connect you with the right support quickly.
School Nurse or GP	Medical professionals have a duty of care. You can speak with them privately about injuries or concerns without fear of immediate consequences.
Parent or Carer	Even when it feels frightening to tell a parent, most parents or carers would rather know and help than find out later. They care about you more than you may realise.
Social Worker	If you are known to social services or in care, your worker can access specialist help and take steps to keep you safe — including from people who are exploiting you.
CAMHS / Counsellor	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services provide free, confidential support for young people experiencing anxiety, trauma, or difficult situations.

Not Sure What to Say? Try These Words:

- "I've seen something that is worrying me and I don't know what to do..."
- "I know someone who might be in danger — can you help me help them?"
- "I don't want anyone to get in trouble. I just want it to stop."

Support & Helplines

Free, confidential help — available right now

Childline	0800 1111	Free, confidential support for children and young people. Available 24/7. Chat online at childline.org.uk
Crimestoppers	0800 555 111	Report crime anonymously — you never have to give your name. Free, 24/7, 100% anonymous.
NSPCC Helpline	0808 800 5000	For adults worried about a child, and for young people wanting to speak to someone outside their immediate circle.
Knife Crime Helpline	101 (ask for KCH)	Specialist police line for knife crime concerns. Non-judgemental support for young people and their families.
Fearless	fearless.org	Report crime anonymously online — specifically designed for young people, with resources and support.
Young Minds Crisis Text	Text YM to 85258	Free mental health support for young people. Text for free, 24/7 crisis support from a trained volunteer.
Catch22 / St Giles Trust	0207 407 3600	Specialist support for young people involved in or at risk of gang activity and county lines exploitation.
Missing People	116 000	Free helpline available 24/7 for families of missing young people and for young people who have gone missing.

IN AN EMERGENCY — ALWAYS CALL 999

Test Your Knowledge

Activities — discuss with your class or answer yourself

Quick Quiz — True or False?

Q 1. Carrying a knife for protection is legal if you never actually use it. **FALSE**

■ *Carrying a knife in public is illegal regardless of intent or use.*

Q 2. County Lines is only a problem in large cities like London. **FALSE**

■ *County lines operates in towns, coastal areas, and rural communities across the whole country.*

Q 3. If someone gives you expensive gifts, they will always want something in return. **TRUE**

■ *Gifts are a recognised grooming tactic. They are used to create obligation and control.*

Q 4. You can report a crime completely anonymously and not face any consequences. **TRUE**

■ *Crimestoppers (0800 555 111) is 100% anonymous. You do not have to give your name.*

Q 5. Most young people carry knives. **FALSE**

■ *The vast majority of young people do not carry knives. This is a false impression created by gangs and social media.*

Q 6. Being used to carry drugs makes you a victim, not a criminal. **TRUE**

■ *Young people who are coerced or groomed into carrying drugs are legally recognised as victims.*

Class Discussion — What Would You Do?

■ A new friend starts giving you expensive gifts for no apparent reason — what do you do?

■ You find out a classmate has been going missing at weekends — who do you tell?

■ Someone contacts you online and offers easy money to 'carry something' for them — how do you respond?

■ You see a knife in someone's bag at school — what is the right thing to do?

Myth vs. Reality

Challenging the lies gangs and social media tell you

MYTH: Carrying a knife keeps you safe

✓ REALITY

Research shows knife carriers are four times more likely to be stabbed than those who do not carry. Carrying a knife escalates confrontations that could otherwise be walked away from. It does not protect you.

MYTH: County Lines only affects certain types of people

✓ REALITY

Gangs target young people of all backgrounds — all ethnicities, all social classes, urban and rural. No young person is immune. Any vulnerability can be exploited.

MYTH: If you are running drugs, you chose to do it so it is your fault

✓ REALITY

The law and society both recognise that groomed young people are victims of criminal exploitation. Police and prosecutors are trained to treat them as victims, not criminals.

MYTH: The police will just arrest you if you talk to them

✓ REALITY

Police forces have specialist safeguarding and exploitation teams whose job is to help young people. Coming forward early gives you the most protection. Silence helps the gang, not you.

MYTH: Gang life means respect, money, and protection

✓ REALITY

The average county lines runner earns almost nothing and faces daily violence, the constant risk of arrest, and being discarded or harmed when they are no longer useful to the gang.

MYTH: You cannot leave a gang once you are involved

✓ REALITY

Specialist exit programmes and support services help people leave gang situations every day. It is never too late, and you will never be left to manage it alone.

Take the Pledge

Make your commitment to your community and to yourself.

I PLEDGE TO STAY SAFE

I, _____, make this pledge:

- ★ I will **NEVER** carry a knife or bladed weapon.
- ★ I will **REPORT** suspicious behaviour to a trusted adult.
- ★ I will **REFUSE** gifts or money from people I do not fully know and trust.
- ★ I will **LOOK OUT** for my friends and speak up if I am worried about them.
- ★ I will **TRUST** the adults in my life who want to keep me safe.
- ★ I will **REMEMBER** that I am always worth more than any gang or any moment of danger.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

"YOUR FUTURE IS WORTH MORE THAN ANY MOMENT OF DANGER."

Share this pledge with your teacher, a parent, or a police officer. Tear it out and keep it somewhere you will see it.

Key Contacts & Resources

IN AN EMERGENCY — ALWAYS CALL 999

101 Non-emergency police	0800 1111 Childline	0800 555 111 Crimestoppers (anon)	85258 Young Minds (text YM)
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Online Resources

childline.org.uk	Confidential chat and advice for children and young people
fearless.org	Anonymous crime reporting — designed specifically for young people
catch-22.org.uk	County Lines and gang exploitation support and intervention services
youngminds.org.uk	Mental health support, resources, and crisis text line for young people
gov.uk/knife-crime	Official government knife crime guidance and support information
knifefree.co.uk	Knife crime awareness and prevention resources for young people

✂ Cut Out and Keep — Your Safety Card

999	Emergency 101	Non-emergency 0800 1111	Childline 0800 555 111	Crimestoppers 85258
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YOU ARE NEVER ALONE. HELP IS ALWAYS AVAILABLE.

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