

More than 900 arrests since the start of British Transport Police's County Lines Taskforce

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December 2020 marked one year on from the beginning of the British Transport Police County Lines Taskforce - a police team dedicated to tackling gangs using the railway to transport drugs.

Since 1 December 2019, the Taskforce has been carrying out operations at stations and train routes across England, Wales and Scotland and have arrested 934 people.

The Taskforce was set up with funding from the Home Office.

A key aim of the team is to protect and safeguard the children who are often used by County Lines gangs to move drugs and cash between import and export locations, which can be hundreds of miles apart.

The youngest person arrested by the Taskforce was a 13-year-old boy in Kent in September of last year - he was carrying £1,500 in cash.

That intervention led to a dawn raid at a flat in south east London, ending with the arrest and charge of two people for modern slavery offences.

This is not a unique example - the Taskforce has secured 15 modern slavery charges to date.

Data acquired over the one-year period has further confirmed that County Lines gangs who use the railway rely on children, typically aged in their mid-teens.

These children are often vulnerable and often victims of exploitation by older men and women who first lure them in with promises of money and status, then use acts or threats of violence to make sure they cannot leave.

They are then sent to far away areas with large amounts of cash ranging from £1,000 to £5,000 and Class A drugs - the amount of money they carry is comparatively small to the amounts held by their controllers.

Since December 2019, officers have seized £308,000 from individual stops, made 471 drug seizures and removed 168 dangerous weapons from the railway.

These operations are always planned only a few days in advance, using the latest intelligence and are often supported by local police forces.

Taskforce lead Detective Superintendent Gareth Williams said: "One year on we have a very strong picture of how County Lines gangs are using the railway. We know where they are operating and the young age groups they target.

"This year, we've used the Home Office funding to bring in experts in child exploitation from notable charities committed to tackling County Lines, and we have expanded the team to make sure we can reach across England, Wales and Scotland, putting pressure on gangs wherever they operate.

"We are also in step with the wider railway industry, training their frontline staff to identify the signs of County Lines and child exploitation. They are our eyes and ears and we use their reports to identify where we should target next.

"Our Taskforce plays a vital role in understanding this issue.

"While local forces target County Lines gangs in their jurisdictions, we work alongside them by targeting the stations and trains these gangs use to move drugs and cash throughout the nation. We will continue this work into 2021."

Home Secretary Priti Patel said: "The County Lines Taskforce are delivering impressive results. It is fantastic to see that in just over a year their important work has led to the arrests of 934 people suspected to be involved in the drugs trade.

"I am immensely grateful to all officers for the work they are doing to break up county lines drugs gangs, helping to prevent vulnerable young people from being drawn into a life of crime."

Photo credit: British Transport Police