

County lines – book review

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Jason Farrell's book explores all aspects of county lines

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In his book, 'County lines', investigative journalist Jason Farrell explores every aspect of a county lines operation, giving the reader an informative look into an ever-growing criminal underworld.

After starting off with an accidental find of traces of illicit drugs in shrimps, Farrell examines the full scale of this national crisis in detail through the eyes of those involved. Putting himself at great risk, he shares his inner dialogue while standing in the face of considerable danger.

Any serving police officer will be familiar with the issues covered. These include the victims of county lines, the mechanisms of a typical operation and the national impact of this crime type.

The book is divided over 15 chapters, each of which focuses on a different aspect, and it is written in a way that will appeal to both professional and non-professional audiences. The characters introduced throughout offer an idea of the challenges that each faced. From Linda, the mummy mule, all the way to Handsome, the hitman and gun runner, each person's account has an angle that could resonate with others: the lack of belonging, the need to protect your child, systematic abuse, and other family and societal failings. Every reader is likely to relate to – or may have personally seen – some of the small details included, reaffirming that county lines is a national crisis that affects everyone.

'County lines' is written in an engaging manner and is difficult to put down. We learn that some of the operating methods adopted by the kingpins in the drug-dealing world are surprisingly sophisticated and would not look out of place in any other 'market'. More effective business models quickly take over from less effective local ones, which has prompted the rapid expansion of the county lines model over time.

Another theme explored is the shift in gang culture. The account given by Cody – in Chapter 3, 'The Dealer' – describes an old-school type of respect or code of conduct, which has now been replaced with a more profit-driven ruthlessness. The change described is startling and chilling. This was

reaffirmed in Chapter 8 ('The Scoreboard', the name of a warped point-scoring system for attacking certain areas of the body), which details the tragic murder of Tavis Spencer-Aitkens, who was stabbed to death just moments from his home.

Chapter 14 ('The Cuckoo') details the experience of Clair and her son Adrian, who was a victim of cuckooing. What was startling was the brazen nature of the process. I naively believed that the phenomenon would take place slowly, over time, with the vulnerable person being befriended and groomed. What was described was the complete opposite, with the dealers forcing their way into the flat.

I found Chapter 10 ('The Psychologist') the most informative, as it highlighted the critical need for a multi-faceted approach to the county lines phenomenon. Dr Carlotta Raby, an expert in her field, created the Gang Affiliation Risk Assessment (GARM), a common-sense approach based on 15 screening questions to identify those children at risk of criminal exploitation (p 189). The book also highlights the cyclical nature of offending, with some of the rescued child victims sadly returning to being involved in county lines operations. One interesting insight was that although boys were considered to be most at risk of criminal exploitation, one in six children referred to the National Referral Mechanism were girls.

The concluding chapter, Chapter 15 ('The Solution'), was frustrating in its lack of answers, though this is through no fault of the writer. Despite possible solutions being put forward, including progressive pupil referral units and emergency measures in established hotspots, I was left with an overwhelming sense that the title of the chapter was optimistic.

Overall, the book invoked a sense of sadness for all of the people whose stories it captured. A number of them stayed with me, in particular that of Lucy, who described a series of tragic events that led her on the path to drug running for a gang. The calculated nature of the dealer's power over her was truly frightening. I would recommend this engaging and insightful book to anyone in policing and, more broadly, anyone with an interest in crime.

County Lines by Jason Farrell can be purchased from booksellers.

- This article was peer reviewed by PC Jack Jeffries, Metropolitan Police Service.

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