

## **Written evidence submitted by Dr. Jack Spicer (DRU0027)**

### ***Who I am***

1. I am Lecturer in Criminology at The University of the West of England (UWE). I have researched and written extensively on the emergence of the 'County Lines' drug supply model onto the policy landscape, the drug market practice of 'cuckooing' and the associated responses by the police and other agencies.
2. In 2019 I was awarded 'Best Early Career Researcher' by the International Society for the Study of Drug Policy for my work in this area.
3. In 2021 I was the recipient of the prestigious Radzinowicz Prize, awarded by The British Journal of Criminology for the article published each year, which, in the opinion of the editors, most contributes to the knowledge of criminal justice and criminal justice issues. The article in question scrutinised the drug market practice of 'cuckooing' and the effect of the responses to it (see Spicer 2021a).

### ***The focus of my response***

4. In this response to the request of the Home Affairs Select Committee I address the question of: *'What is your view on the UK Government's 10-Year Drug Strategy for England and Wales, which was published in December 2021?'*
5. Within this I focus specifically on the supply control aspect of the strategy at both a broad level and specifically in relation to County Lines.
6. My response refers to my own and other research. I welcome the committee to contact me if they would like to know more or receive copies of the referenced work.

### ***Executive Summary***

7. While there are elements of the UK Government's drug strategy that are to be welcomed, such as greater investment in drug treatment services, when it comes to the domain of supply control, the strategy fundamentally pursues the same flawed approach that has been promoted by all the other strategies that have come before.
8. Arrests, seizures and punishment of those involved in drug supply with the ultimate goal of eliminating drug markets are the chief aims sought by a range of enforcement interventions, but there is a lack of evidence on the success of these strategies in reducing drug market harms. This undermines claims of the strategy being evidence based.

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9. While acknowledging the harms and exploitation existing within some drug markets is a welcome development, much of the responses to 'County Lines' and 'cuckooing' have not been successful in reducing these harms and have sometimes led to unintended consequences.

10. A more appropriate supply control policy would incorporate harm reduction principles to its aims, actively recognise the role of inequality in driving drug market activity and take seriously the prospect of alternative regulatory frameworks.

### ***Evidence about drug law enforcement***

11. There is a lack of robust research evidence available that evaluates enforcement interventions aimed at drug supply control (Babor et al 2018). This means that the evidence base for the approach promoted by the UK Government in their strategy is weak.

12. When evaluating the Drug Strategy 2010, the Government (2017) itself acknowledged the need for more research in this area, concluding there was insufficient evidence 'to robustly measure the overall impact of enforcement or enforcement-related activity on levels of drug use and harm, or value for money' (p.107).

13. Investment in this research has not been forthcoming and that which does exist has not been taken into consideration. Unevidenced and unrealistic aims continue to be proposed, including stopping drugs entering the UK via "a ring of steel" (UK Government 2021 p.7) and eliminating their presence "from our cities, towns, and villages" (UK Government p.6).

14. The unintended consequences of enforcement interventions such as increased violence due to drug market disruption (Werb et al 2011) and health harms related to variable drug purity (Harris et al. 2015) are not considered.

### ***'Rolling up' County Lines***

15. The drug supply model referred to as County Lines has received significant attention over the past few years. The recent strategy focuses heavily on this and promises to 'roll up' County Lines through a suite of enforcement activities.

16. Various claims are made about the success that has been achieved so far in this area and how these will be pursued even more stridently. Yet scrutinising some of this 'success' suggests a slightly different picture than what is presented (Spicer 2021b).

17. The numbers of phone lines closed down is not simply a result of enforcement intervention, but also partly due to inactive lines being removed from the list compiled by the National County Lines Coordination Centre and broader changes in reporting by police forces. This has been noted in official reports (see NCLCC 2021) and is a poor way of measuring 'success' against County Lines (Spicer 2021c).

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18. Out of the high numbers of arrests made as part of County Lines crackdown operations, many are of low level user dealers at the very bottom end of the market rather than of the so-called gang leaders or kingpins (Spicer 2021b).

19. The amount of cash and drugs seized ultimately makes a very small proportion of the estimated profit levels of an individual County Line (NCA 2018). It is also a drop in the ocean when considered in light of estimates of the overall size of the UK's heroin and cocaine market (Black 2020).

20. More generally there has been a form of political scapegoating occurring on the topic of County Lines since its emergence on the policy landscape (Spicer 2021c). Various populations have been blamed for the supply model's burgeoning presence, associated violence and involvement of young people, including ruthless gangs and 'middle class' cocaine users. Not only are these claims inaccurate, but they transfer blame away from the socio-economic conditions associated with austerity that allow County Lines drug markets to flourish.

### ***Responding to cuckooing***

21. In addition to violence and the exploitation of young people, another aspect of the County Lines phenomenon raised as particularly problematic has been the practice of cuckooing, where vulnerable people, often who use heroin and/or crack cocaine themselves, have their homes taken over by drug dealers (Spicer et al 2020).

22. There has been some positive developments in recognising this practice and seeking to respond to it appropriately by various agencies. However, since being originally identified as a problem circa 2015, my research has demonstrated that it has been the subject of an 'amplification spiral', where the responses to it such as crackdown operations have had the unintended consequence of making the problem worse (Spicer 2021a). This has included more people becoming effected and more exploitative ways of it occurring taking place.

23. To truly respond to the problem effectively, a public health approach must be pursued, and the limitations of a criminal justice approach acknowledged.

### ***Conclusion***

24. There will undoubtedly be a host of arrests, seizures and sentences held up as evidence of success of the supply control elements of the Government's drug strategy over the coming years. It is important not to fall into the trap of viewing this as evidence of a war being won.

25. Until the Government are prepared to start thinking differently about supply control the same outcomes that have been delivered for decades and that have widely been considered unacceptable will continue to occur.

26. The aims of supply control must be reconfigured around harm reduction principles (Stevens 2013). The role of inequality in driving drug markets must be recognised. And alternative regulatory frameworks must be considered. Until then the drug prohibition record, with all its attendant harms and failures, will remain on repeat.

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## References

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