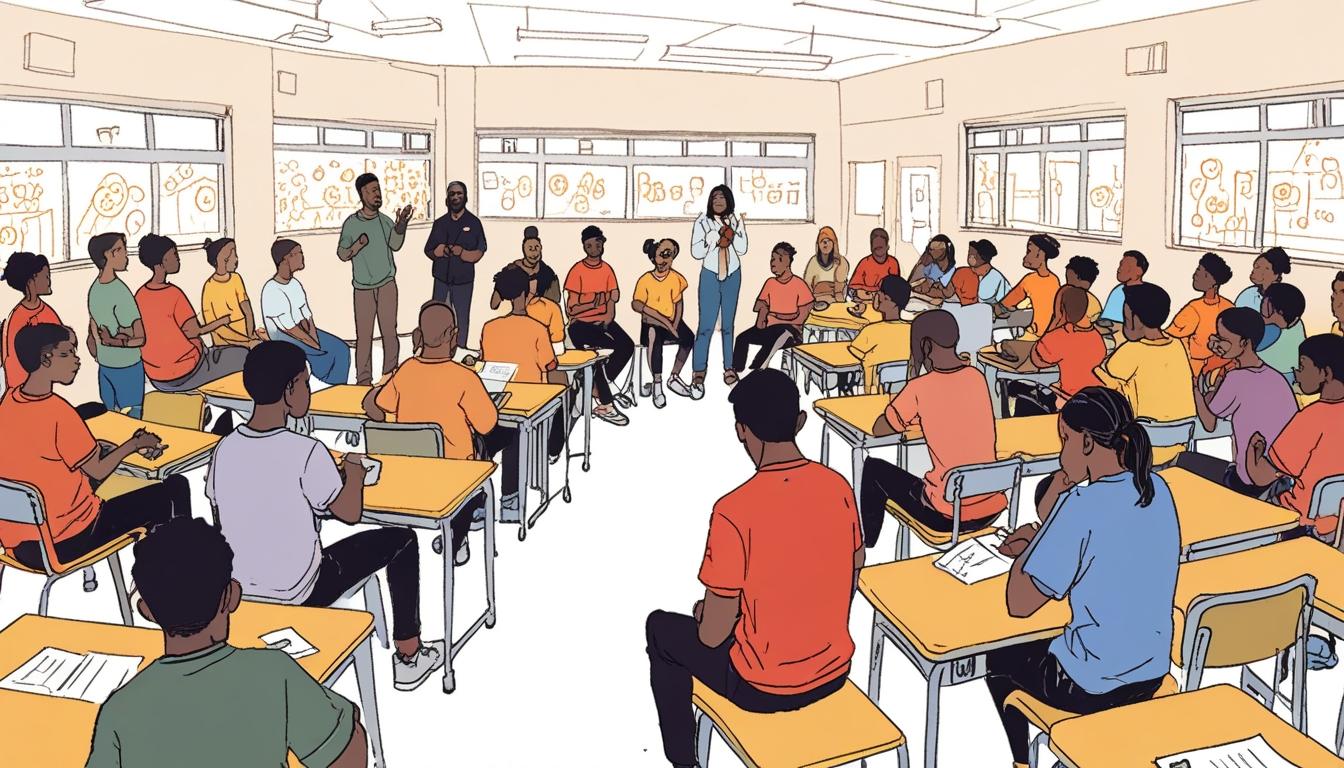
# Young students targeted by gangs as 'county lines' drug dealing rises



In north London, a troubling reality is unfolding as young students confront early attempts at grooming for criminal activities, specifically involving 'county lines' drug dealing operations. During an after-school workshop designed to combat such risks, three students, aged between 13 and 14, openly shared their experiences of being targeted by gangs. The atmosphere in the classroom was charged with the weight of their stories, yet none felt ready to disclose the specifics of their encounters, which quite often involve intimidation tactics such as threats against family members or manipulation through deception by older gang affiliates.

These disturbing revelations highlight a larger issue within the community, where child criminal exploitation has become a significant problem. The workshop, conducted by The Safety Box under the auspices of the London’s Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), aims to steer vulnerable youths away from a life embroiled in violence and exploitation. Statistically, the workshop's attendees represent a substantial portion of their class, indicating that many more may silently endure similar threats or might have already witnessed friends caught up in the stark realities of gang involvement.

This after-school initiative, funded by the VRU, is one part of a broader public health approach to tackle the rising knife crime rates. Recent figures released by the Office for National Statistics indicate a staggering 240 per cent increase over the past decade in the number of children murdered with knives. In response, the government has recently proposed several legislative measures, including harsher penalties for selling knives to minors and imposing potential jail terms of up to 10 years for those involved in grooming children for drug trafficking purposes, a practice colloquially known as 'cuckooing.'

Lib Peck, the director of the VRU, emphasised the need to shift focus from punitive measures to preventative strategies. Speaking to *The Independent*, she stated, “I think the most important thing is to recalibrate the conversation... what we're doing to make sure that we're putting as much emphasis and as much investment into prevention as we possibly can.” The VRU, established in 2019 by Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, has initiated a slew of multi-agency collaborations aimed at altering the trajectory for at-risk youths by embedding support systems within the community, including mentors in schools and youth workers in critical settings such as hospitals and police custody suites.

One notable success story involves a 17-year-old identified as Hudson, who has managed to transform his life trajectory following intensive mentoring after facing severe legal trouble linked to drugs and weapons. His testimony illustrates the profound impact of support systems. “If they [Safety Box] had never been in my life I would probably be in jail right now,” he relayed to *The Independent*, reflecting on how mentorship opened new doors for him during a pivotal time.

In parallel, initiatives targeting younger children are underway to address the root causes of future vulnerabilities. At Rushey Green Primary School in Lewisham, a VRU-funded project has been implemented to aid children, many of whom are behind in language development, thereby setting them up for potential exclusion from school. According to the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, a significant percentage of children facing exclusion have undiagnosed communication challenges. Headteacher Lisa Williams noted the necessity of equipping children with the ability to express themselves, saying, “If a young child can’t talk properly, they will struggle throughout the day...”

The VRU's comprehensive strategies aim to tackle youth violence not merely through reactive measures but with proactive interventions designed to catch problems early and enhance communication skills among children susceptible to gang influence. These efforts are rooted in research that shows early language difficulties correlate strongly with later behavioural problems, including criminal engagement.

As diverse London communities grapple with these critical issues, projects like those led by The Safety Box and VRU are striving to reshape narratives around youth, violence, and language, forging pathways toward brighter futures for the city's most vulnerable populations.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/over-500-weapons-seized-and-1-400-vulnerable-people-safeguarded-during-crackdown-of-county-line-drug-dealers> - This article supports the claim about County Lines drug dealing operations and the exploitation of vulnerable individuals, including children, in drug trafficking. It highlights the efforts of police forces to combat these issues.
* <https://www.essex.police.uk/news/essex/news/news/2024/december/county-lines-28-arrested/> - This news piece corroborates the issue of County Lines drug dealing and the efforts by law enforcement to arrest and disrupt these operations, which often involve exploiting young people.
* <https://www.btp.police.uk/news/btp/news/england/four-arrested-for-drug-offences-during-county-lines-operation--london-bridge/> - This article provides further evidence of law enforcement actions against County Lines operations, specifically in London, highlighting the ongoing efforts to combat drug trafficking.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/offices-for-national-statistics-publishes-latest-crime-statistics> - This link would typically provide data on crime statistics, including knife crime rates, which are mentioned in the article as a concern related to County Lines activities.
* <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/violence-reduction-unit> - This webpage explains the role and initiatives of the London Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), which is mentioned in the article as a key player in addressing youth violence and exploitation.
* <https://www.rcslt.org/> - The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists website provides information on communication challenges in children, which is relevant to the VRU-funded project at Rushey Green Primary School aimed at addressing these issues.