

Review Britain's Child Drug Runners, Channel 4

'It's a form of modern slavery,' notes one officer

★★★★★

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The fact that the Dispatches documentary team always does such a thorough investigation into its chosen topic is something I am coming to personally dread, even as my professional admiration grows. To watch its masterful assemblages of the individual stories that humanise appalling statistics and whatever bleak aspect of suffering they are bringing into the light is to become fully and remorselessly informed, even and especially if you would really rather not be.

Britain's Child Drug Runners was no exception. It was a beyond-the-headlines look at the growing phenomenon of county lines gangs - criminal networks that use children, some as young as 11, to move and sell drugs between cities. They groom them en masse via videos on social media showing dealers brandishing designer goods and wads of cash, and target others individually, gradually introducing them to the world, normalising their activities and making sure their new recruits are in too deep to turn back if and when the penny drops.

Karla is the mother of 16-year-old Jacob, who first got involved with his gang when he was 13. They live in Banbury. "It's just a little market town," Karla says bitterly. "But it doesn't matter what kind of parent you are; if they get hold of your kid, there's nothing you can do about it." She eventually put him into residential care in a different area in the hope of breaking the gang's grip, but it was too powerful.

Another 16-year-old, Emily, is found in a flat with two men who run one of the biggest county lines gangs in Oxford and who have taken over the home

from a vulnerable owner, a common practice known as "cuckooing". The police phone her father to come and take her back with him, because he lives further from the gang's area than her mother (who sends them screengrabs she has taken from Emily's phone of gang requests that she set up someone for them to rob), but she does not want to go. She jumps out of his moving car and has to be tracked down again.

Fifteen-year-old Daniel was targeted when he was 11. "I thought I was just selling a bit of weed and getting everything - clothes, money ..."

The reality, as the police, social workers, support staff, youth workers and mentors describe it - often during school visits to ever-earlier year groups as the gangs' target demographic gets younger - is of children being forced to live in crack dens for days at a time to deal; of shoving wraps of cocaine and heroin (the bursting of any one of which will kill them) into their anal or vaginal cavities to transport them; and often accruing debts that enmesh them yet further with their criminal bosses. They see, of course, very little of the money and glamorous accoutrements promised. "It's a form of modern slavery," notes one officer, and one that - when it comes to transporting the drugs - also involves sexual abuse.

The police seemed very keen to stress that this is not just a problem for deprived and particularly vulnerable children and young people, but that middle-class youngsters are also at risk from dealers who want to enter posher, untapped markets. I am sure this is true, but their flagging of it multiple times added an extra layer of sadness to an already dreadful story, suggesting as it did that their best hope of attracting the necessary attention to the crisis - and the funding needed to help prevent it - is to make it more relatable to the people who hold the power to change things. The empathy bridge will not stretch across a single experiential remove. It is the worst paradox that, in the collective imagination, it is children who have already suffered who are most easily left to suffer more - as if only the truly innocent are worth saving.

Youth mentor Anton Noble beseeches the parents of children involved with the gangs to tell their sons and daughters how little the gangs care for them. "Tell them:



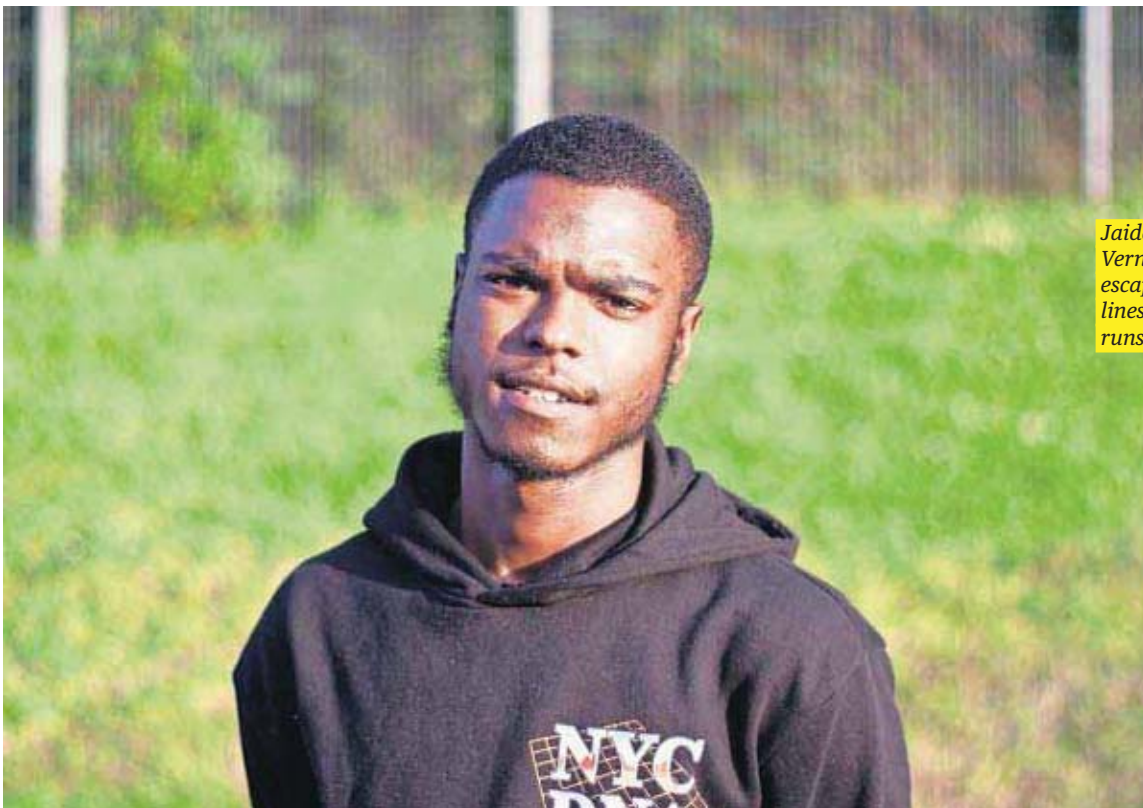
'Dealers will replace you - I can't. They won't cry if you die - I will.'

Karla cannot replace Jacob. He died in an apparent suicide in his bedroom this summer. Karla goes through the condolence cards she received. "His friends," she says, "were doing their GCSEs." She cries. *Names have been changed.*



**Supergirl's
Superman,
Tyler Hoechlin,
has been cast
as The CW's
Superman in its
new Superman
and Lois Lane
series. Do try
and keep up.**





Jaiden
Vernon, who
escaped county
lines and now
runs a business

