Being There: Ethnography and the Study of Policing Conference Abstract

Presentation Title:
“Responding to County Lines: challenges of policing in partnership and adopting harm reduction principles”

Abstract:
A recent development in drug markets across England and Wales has involved drug selling gangs expanding out of their native cities and attempting to set up dealing operations in smaller, more rural or coastal towns. This phenomenon, typically referred to as ‘County Lines’, has been associated with a host of harms including increased levels of serious violence and the exploitation of vulnerable local populations. Of particular note has been the tactic of cuckooing, a process where these gangs take over a local drug user’s residence and use it as a base to deal from.

My PhD research is exploring how a police force in Southern England is interpreting and responding to County Lines. I am currently engaged in a yearlong ethnographic and interview based study of a pilot police response to the issue. A key aim of this pilot is to develop close working relationships with a range of partner agencies to generate intelligence, as well as to support safeguarding and preventative measures. A second aim is to attempt to shape the local drug market to operate in less harmful ways, rather than being primarily concerned with reducing supply. Implicit to this therefore is the acknowledgement that drug dealing will always occur and that, rather than trying to eradicate it, a more productive approach is for law enforcement to seek to reduce the associated harms and regulate the local drug market.

This presentation will present emerging intermediary findings gleaned from ongoing fieldwork. In particular, it will review the challenges associated with pursuing a harm reduction rather than more conventional crime reduction approach to drug policing, and explore the potential for greater inter-professional partnerships and synergies.