



Karla's son Jacob was a victim of county lines drug trafficking in the Cotswolds. He was only 16 when he died

Losing Jacob

THE GARDEN ROSES might be just starting to fade, but for mum Karla they'll always pack a poignant vibrancy. "Jacob was born on Valentine's Day, so I always associate red roses with him," she says. "At his funeral, we all had roses and everybody wore something red. So I always call these Jacob's flowers."

The scene stands in stark contrast to the day six months ago when Karla found her son's lifeless body in his bedroom. An inquest has yet to rule on the cause of death, but she believes it was a cry for help that ended in tragedy. Jacob was just 16 years old, but deeply involved in so-called

"county lines" drugs trafficking – a new, pernicious trade in moving drugs around the country that's ensnaring children like Jacob. His story is just one of those told in this week's Channel 4 documentary, *Britain's Child Drug Runners*.

Study a map of the UK's county lines and, at first glance, it looks like a plan of national train routes. But these are actually organised crime networks that target children as young as 11 to operate as mules, delivering drugs in towns across the country. Lured initially by promises of branded clothing and money, the youngsters who have been groomed soon find it impossible to extricate themselves from the clutches of big-city gangs.

"The children who are asked to carry drugs, or undertake other tasks for the gang, can end up with debts when the money or drugs are taken from them," says Hannah Farncombe, Oxfordshire County Council's deputy director of children's social care. "They can be subject to threats or actual violence, towards themselves or loved ones, which forces them to continue working for the gang and maintains their silence. They are often terrified and unable to trust anyone who may be trying to help them."

The problem is big and growing and is drawing in children who have no previous associations with crime. "It's wrong to assume that this only happens to children who are already

GROWING THREAT

Grieving mum Karla, her son Jacob (below) and the press reaction to the "county lines" problem

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COUNTY LINES DEALERS SNARE 10,000 CHILDREN

Drug trafficking operations treble in one year

victims with non-paying jobs and they're heading to a quiet Scottish town near you...

Terrorised by invasion of 'county lines' drug mobsters



at hiding what was happening to him, but there were signs I didn't spot. I didn't know where he'd got some of the tracksuits he was wearing. And he always seemed to have money at the weekend. But then his behaviour became worse; he'd stay out all night or disappear for days."

Karla still doesn't know exactly how her son became embroiled in county lines drugs trafficking, but thinks that he was enticed by promises of a money-no-object lifestyle. "It's glamorised so much in music videos and kids think that it's cool. All the clothes, shoes and disposable income. It's not until they get into it that they realise it's the opposite."

As he became immersed, Jacob's attitude went from cocky to aggressive, with him regularly telling his mum that the police wouldn't be able to convict him until he was 18. But Karla believes the swagger masked a fast-growing fear that he was in too deep. "He turned into this horrible boy. He was verbally abusive and it was hell for two years. By the end, he wasn't even hiding it. One time, I saw him blatantly dealing outside the house and he just laughed it off and said, 'What are you going to do about it?'"

"I tried everything - I chased him down the street and grabbed the back of his hoodie, went knocking on the doors of dangerous people to

try to find him, locked him in the house, but he'd always escape.

"He was completely blasé about it. Each time he got away with something, it gave him that little bit more confidence. But he was clearly worried about something. He'd be sleeping downstairs and there were knives hidden all around the house."

Feeling increasingly desperate, Karla told the authorities in October 2018 that Jacob would "end up killing somebody or be dead within the next 12 months". But events then escalated: Jacob's face was slashed in a stand-off, and all the while his debts were mounting. On 20 April this year, Jacob died.

Karla, who also has a daughter, Lauren, 26, is understandably pessimistic about the future, fearing that a generation of children risk becoming "lost". But is there really so little hope?

"It's very hard to drive out this problem altogether," admits Hannah Farncombe. "There's evidence that children from all different backgrounds have been targeted and it isn't just an inner-city issue. Smaller market towns are fresh territory for those from further afield to exploit. Plus, it means that the police have to start from scratch, because these are unknown areas."

AND CLASS, IT seems, is also no barrier to those who are intent on exploiting vulnerable teenagers. "Ordinary aspects of adolescence can expose children to dangerous contacts. Feelings of loneliness or loss, for instance, are push-points for groomers and exploiters," says Farncombe. "But I don't want to cause a panic. The best defence is for children to be well educated about this problem, so that they're

'At his funeral we all had roses and wore something red'

ahead of the game. And for there to be a good network around them: parents and adults who are listening and encouraging children to develop emotional resilience."

For Karla, though, such lessons have come too late. "People still lay red roses outside the house," she says of what's happened in her community in the aftermath of Jacob's death. "Last weekend, there were lots of flowers there because it's six months since he passed. It's nice to know that people are still thinking about him."

"I keep in touch with his friends and try to talk some sense into them. Not that it does much good. But they know I'm available on the other end of the phone. I want to help them as much as I can. I don't want people to look at me and think, 'poor cow'. I'd much rather they were thinking, 'poor Jacob.'" **DAVID BROWN**

involved in a gang," adds Farncombe. "There are examples of children being targeted in all kinds of locations."

IN KARLA'S CASE, that location is within the idyllic rolling hills on the edge of the rural Oxfordshire Cotswolds. She hasn't felt able to return to her own home since her son's death - until very recently it's remained a police crime scene - and has been staying with her father, from where she's speaking to *RT*.

Jacob was, by her own admission, no angel. "He was always a handful and strong-willed," she reveals, "but I never could have predicted that this would happen. Initially, he was good