

# Still at risk

## Briefing

A review of support for  
trafficked children



SUPPORTING AND  
EMPOWERING  
REFUGEES



The  
Children's  
Society

# Briefing

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## Context

Increased understanding of the magnitude of child trafficking in the UK, and continued concerns about trafficked children going missing from care have prompted a review into the support available to young victims of human trafficking.

To look at the current situation within our care and safeguarding systems, and to explore options to improve service responses for trafficked children in England, the Home Office commissioned the Refugee Council and The Children's Society to conduct a review of the practical care arrangements for trafficked children.

## The study

The study consisted of in-depth interviews with 17 young people who were trafficked as children and had escaped; interviews with 18 professionals who work directly or indirectly with children who have been trafficked including from statutory and non-statutory agencies; an online survey completed by 52 local authorities in England; and a review of existing literature. The study was designed to:

- explore the experiences of children who had been trafficked and were being cared for and supported by a local authority
- look at agency responses to child trafficking in the context of best practice guidance in child protection and safeguarding
- assess the multi-agency responses to supporting trafficked children
- identify good practice and areas for improvement or change

## What is 'trafficking'?

Child trafficking is the recruitment and movement of children for the purpose of exploitation, whether or not they have been forced or deceived. This includes sexual exploitation, forced labour such as domestic servitude and forced criminality such as cannabis cultivation. The official definition of trafficking is set out in Article 3 of the Palermo Protocol to Prevent, Suppress And Punish Trafficking In Persons, Especially Women And Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime (2000). This study focused on children who had been trafficked into England.

## What is the extent of child trafficking in the UK?

The government recently made a first attempt to set a baseline and describe the full extent of human trafficking in the UK by gathering data from various statutory and non-governmental organisations. It reported that 2,077 potential victims of trafficking were identified in the UK during 2011.<sup>1</sup> Of these 24% were children, while for 7% of potential victims, their age was

unknown. However, the government report highlights that the number of victims of human trafficking may be higher than this, pointing out that over half (54%) of all potential victims of trafficking were not referred to the government's central system for identifying victims – the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). It is generally accepted among experts that the true number of trafficked children in the UK is likely to be far higher.

## Trafficked children's experiences

### Fear and confusion

All too common in young people's experiences was the degree to which many had been traumatised, isolated and scared during their exploitation. The effects of these experiences endured once they had escaped.

*One day it is too much for my head. I would cry every day, I can't eat, I can't do nothing. One day I said ... I feel like killing myself – better than this kind of life. Then my foster mum had to ring everybody. They were scared for me. (Frances<sup>2</sup>)*

Agencies' poor responses to them compounded their difficulties. For some, initial contact with authorities had been frightening:

*Being in a police station until the next day, for the first day I am very scared. Very scared crying, fainting, they took me to hospital, bring me back to the police station. God, it's really, really horrible. (Precious)*

Young people were confused by the complex processes they were engaged with – for example the immigration and criminal justice processes. Their problems multiplied as a result of language barriers; poor, or sometimes incorrect, legal advice; and a failure by specialists to spend adequate time (or provide appropriate information or support) to guide them as they progressed. Professionals confirmed these accounts in their interviews. For example, they told us that young people were very poorly-informed about what they might expect or be entitled to:

*They are in a very parlous state in terms of their knowledge of how they can be protected – which sets them apart from children who are suffering abuse who are indigenous children, who know they can talk to teachers, or to health workers ... and know there is somewhere they can go with their concerns or their unhappiness – whereas children from overseas do not have that option.*

### Discovery and identification

Failure to recognise that they were children or victims of trafficking resulted in three of the young people we interviewed being sent to adult prison, and two to an immigration removal centre. Those who went to prison were prosecuted for offences committed while they were under the control of traffickers including immigration offences. In these circumstances, young people were very confused about what was happening:

*I don't understand why, I don't know ... the solicitor asked me to plead guilt, I pleaded guilty, I don't know what 'guilty' means. (Precious)*

Professional respondents reflected that authorities can be too quick to criminalise trafficked children:

*I think there is the danger of an assumption that the situations where trafficked children are found means they are not seen as children in the first instance. Whether it is a police raid on a brothel or cannabis house, or picking someone up on the street for selling DVDs ... the first thought in some professionals' minds is that they have control over their own actions so they are probably an adult as opposed to a child victim who is caught up in this.*

Ten of the children had their ages disputed, and some had undergone multiple age assessments before it was agreed by the authorities that they were children. Sometimes children's ages were questioned on the basis of the false documents traffickers had provided them. Being treated as an adult can put trafficked children in particular danger of further exploitation as they will not receive the support and protection they need.

### Care and support

Of the group we interviewed only a few reported positive experiences of the care they had received from social workers. Although some individual social workers were identified as having been supportive, practice varied widely and criticisms included frequent changes in personnel, irregular contact with social workers and a lack of understanding of trafficked children's needs.

*When I went to social services I didn't have a social worker and my case was from one person to another person so I didn't really know who I'm gonna go talk to because I didn't have no-one who really knew my case...my keyworker was really bad ... She took me to (the supermarket) and she made me feel like she didn't want people to see her with me ... like she's on her phone and she's far away from me, and I'm in a new country and I don't even know how to say 'rice' or how to buy things ... She didn't take me to no GP, no nothing. (Josephine)*

Professionals expressed concerns over the shortage of appropriate accommodation that local authorities can use to support potentially trafficked children, especially when trying to provide a safe location and a level of care appropriate to their needs. A respondent from a local authority explained:

*A lot of young people we place them in flats. It sounds horrendous and it probably is really. We try to get other people who come from the same country to pop round and support them ... I think it is really hard to give young people the (right) amount of support ... We are not allowed to put them in residential care in case they may be over 18.*

Alongside inadequate care, some young people had not been supported to use the vital services they were entitled to as children. For example, help with accessing education:

*(The social workers) didn't even want to help me with my education – 'cos I couldn't read or write – and every time they kept telling me, 'You are an immigrant so you can't go to school.' They say they will get you a private tutor but they never do. Every time, every review, they talk about this thing and the immigration officer was saying, 'But we need to prepare you for the worst when they send you back.' (Christine)*

## Suspicion and doubt

Overall young people reported that, despite their vulnerability, they had often been treated with suspicion and prejudice, as so-called 'illegal immigrants' rather than children in need or victims of trafficking, and exposed to a variety of forms of maltreatment. This was summed up by two young people:

*The whole experience with social services looking after me, I didn't really trust them at all, even later when they accepted me [as a child]. (Anne)*

*Social service asked my foster mum to throw me out on the street. They say because now they done the age assessment and also because you are illegal immigrant that they don't want to have anything to do with me. (Christine)*

## Transition to adulthood

These difficulties could be made worse when a young person was between the ages of 16 and 18, when local authorities may act with undue haste to move them into independent accommodation. As one solicitor explained:

*I have come across a lot of examples of young people who, when they have turned 18, and they have been in a placement for a couple of years, have been moved on with a matter of two or three hours' notice to accommodation they have never seen.*

As children turn 18 and transition into adulthood, the implications of their immigration status also become acute, as highlighted by a respondent from the voluntary sector:

*There are far too many children who don't get a service at all, because the central issue is that their transition to adulthood is entirely caught up in the immigration process ... they can end up being here with no recourse to public funds, no housing – they are then spectacularly vulnerable to being criminally-exploited, because what else are they going to do? Where are they going to get money, shelter, support?*

## What needs to change?

The prevalence of negative and damaging experiences among the young people we interviewed, echoed in professionals' responses, suggests that there is a need for fundamental and rapid change in support services and in broader systems.

The responses from professionals and local authorities indicated that current guidance, toolkits and other resources were helpful, but were not being consistently implemented. They suggested that a key cause of this was an absence of understanding and awareness of child trafficking at all levels in local authorities and within other associated professions. This leads to a failure to understand, prioritise and adequately respond to trafficked children's needs.

Current guidance needs to be implemented, including that relating to safeguarding children who may have been trafficked and guidance related to separated children more broadly.<sup>3</sup> There is also an urgent need to recognise and address the policy constraints on providing effective support to children who are subject to immigration control, including potential victims of trafficking. The clear examples illustrated by the young people's evidence point to circumstance

where children's age, lack of documentation and immigration status, impede their ability to access effective support to meet their welfare needs.

Overall, some ways in which the support provided for children who have been trafficked can be improved are to:

- **increase understanding of child trafficking and the statutory responsibilities to safeguard all children, regardless of their immigration status, nationality or documentation** – through raising awareness, and increased training, particularly of those in statutory agencies working with potential victims of trafficking;
- **ensure all agencies implement all statutory and practice guidance for safeguarding trafficked children and separated children more widely** – all professionals should view potentially trafficked children as children first and foremost and entitled to a child protection response as a foundation for effective, protective interagency collaboration;
- **implement national responses to all potential victims of child trafficking** – ensure there are sufficient, appropriate options for good quality accommodation and care to ensure all children have a full-time carer and are kept safe. This may include moving them away from the area where they would be at risk of being targeted by their traffickers or going missing;
- **establish a system of protection that includes an independent trusted adult appointed to a separated child as soon as they come to an authority's attention.** This person's role would be to ensure that all potential victims of trafficking are able to understand their rights, ensure that their voice is heard in decisions that affect them and are supported effectively through the different legal processes that they are engaged in.

Although there has already been some progress in helping the victims of child trafficking in recent years, the voices of young people and those that work with them in this study clearly show that much more still needs to be done. It is vital that as soon as children come into contact with any agency that they are given the help that they need to be kept safe and that they are able to fully recover from their experiences.

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- 1 UKHTC: *A Baseline Assessment on the Nature and Scale of Human Trafficking in 2011* – published by the Serious and Organised Crime Agency
  - 2 The names of the young people have been changed.
  - 3 For example *Safeguarding children who may have been trafficked: practice guidance* and the Department for Education statutory guidance on the *Provision of Accommodation for 16 and 17 year old young people who may be homeless and/or require accommodation*
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The full report is available at [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk) and [www.childrenssociety.org.uk](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk)

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