

Sex Trafficking in the UK: An Overview



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In the UK, sex trafficking is considered a form of “modern slavery”. The Modern Slavery Act of 2015 was intended to consolidate and simplify offences considered to be a part of modern slavery. Among these were bonded labour, withholding of travel documents and physical and sexual abuse. Recent figures indicate that the number of potential victims is increasing, particularly those individuals exploited for sex. From 2014 to 2016, the UK has seen a 40% rise in the number of potential victims of trafficking reported to local authorities and trafficking agencies. According to a 2015 summary from the National Crime Agency’s Modern Slavery Human Trafficking Unity (MSHTU), the top six most common recorded countries of origin for potential victims of trafficking were Albania, Vietnam, Nigeria, Romania, the UK and Poland, with potential victims originating from Albania representing 18% of all referrals. At present, the number of people being reported as potential victims of trafficking in general has increased from a total of 1745 in 2013 to 3805 in 2015 (National Crime Agency, 2016). When looking at the reported adult sex trafficking statistics specifically, there were 880 reported sex trafficking victims in 2016, the overwhelming majority of whom came from Albania ($N = 391$) followed by Nigeria ($N = 95$) and China ($N = 50$). The NCA (2016) estimates that people are trafficked from approximately 108 countries worldwide, making it extremely difficult to coordinate intervention initiatives with some governments that might be unstable or in conflict (e.g. Afghanistan). It should be noted that estimations of the extent of trafficking in general, and sex trafficking in particular, should be taken with caution, because it is extremely difficult to identify and track victims, as victims are often reluctant to report their victimization. This is due to a number of factors including, but not limited to, language barriers, lack of education, deceit, intimidation, threats to self or family, etc.

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Child Sex Trafficking and Exploitation

It is estimated that more than one-third of all trafficking victims in the UK are under the age of 18, and there has been a 103% rise in child sex trafficking specifically from 2015 to 2016. During this time period, the most common country of origin for child sex trafficking victims was within the UK, followed by Albania, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Eritrea.

Terminology around sex trafficking of children can be confusing at times, as many government and non-profit publications use the terms “trafficking” and “child sexual exploitation” interchangeably (Brayley & Cockbain, 2014). Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is defined by the UK government as:

A form of child sexual abuse where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology. (p. 5)

Prevention and Intervention

The Sexual Offences Act of 2003 established a framework for intervening in cases of child sexual exploitation through the ability of agencies to issue Sexual Risk Orders (SROs) and Sexual Harm Prevention Orders (SHPOs) for children believed to be victims or potential victims of CSE (HM Government, 2017a, 2017b). However, these are also umbrella measures that focus not only on trafficked victims but also on any form of sexual abuse.

In 2015, the hospitality industry became the focus of law enforcement initiatives to combat sex and other forms of trafficking. COMBAT, a recent research project led by the University of West London, estimated that 110,000 sex slaves and labour slaves are exploited in hotels and restaurants every year in the European Union (University of West London, 2016).

In 2015, the Metropolitan Police launched Operation Makesafe, an initiative to highlight the role of community businesses in educating employees regarding the identification of children who might be at risk of sexual exploitation. Those targeted were employees of hotels, serviced apartments, bars and pubs and taxi companies. Traffickers often take children to venues like these to meet with potential abusers, and employees are encouraged to remain vigilant for warning signs so that they might intervene or prevent abuse from occurring.

Although there have been some steps taken in the UK, there is still a substantial dearth of resources for victims and potential victims of trafficking. Organizations such as Parents Against Child Sexual Exploitation (PACE), the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), Unseen UK and the Human

Trafficking Foundation provide information, raise money and employ experts to influence public policy, but there is still a long way to go towards providing straightforward referral pathways for victims. In a report published by the Work and Pensions Committee, “inexcusable” failures in the UK system included allowing victims to suffer, while perpetrators remained free (2017). This was the result of insufficient support for victims and lack of training of agencies for recognizing and alerting authorities of potential incidents of trafficking.

References

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