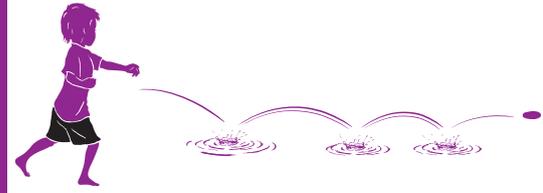




Discussion Paper



Winter 2008

Child Trafficking and Missing Children

Concern has been raised in the UK about the high number of trafficked, or suspected trafficked, children who have gone missing from care. The failure of authorities to identify these children as trafficking victims, disputes over age and the failure to provide safe and supportive accommodation contribute to the risk of being lured away by traffickers. This paper looks at the ways in which trafficked children or those vulnerable to trafficking are going missing in the UK.

Extent and forms

In 2007 research conducted by ECPAT UK found that out of 80 known or suspected trafficked children in the north of England 60 percent had gone missing from local authority social care. Similarly, government findings showed that nationwide out of 330 known or suspected trafficked children 56 percent went missing without trace from social services care. In 2008, a national newspaper also reported on 400 foreign children missing from care around major British ports and airports between 2004 and 2007, some of whom may have been trafficked.

Children are trafficked to the UK for both sexual exploitation and forced labour. Case studies show children are still afraid of their traffickers even after they have been taken into care. Living with fear means that children are vulnerable to being coerced, threatened or lured back to the agents or traffickers. These children are moved to different locations in the UK and sold on to other traffickers in an effort to avoid detection by authorities.

British children, not necessarily only those in local authority social care but also from individual homes, are vulnerable to being trafficked within the UK, primarily for sexual exploitation. These children, mainly girls, persistently go missing for relatively short periods of time without explanation. They are groomed by their exploiters under the guise of friendship and affection, given drugs or alcohol to control them and sometimes shown sexually explicit material to normalise their abuse. They are taken to different towns or cities for sexual exploitation, threatened with violence and forced to pay back the money spent on them.

Both British-born and migrant children who fear being trafficked abroad for a forced marriage often attempt to run away from home. Their parents report them as missing to police and if returned to their family without a proper risk assessment these children may be taken abroad and forced to marry. Children in these situations find it difficult to disclose their concerns to authorities. Families intent on forcing their children into a marriage commonly withdraw them from school or take them abroad coinciding with the school or college summer holidays, and the risk is that they will not return to education. Parents, relatives and the wider community may use relentless pressure and emotional blackmail, threatening behaviour, imprisonment, physical violence and confiscation of documents to coerce young people to enter marriage and to prevent their escape.

Causes and context

Trafficked children are a highly vulnerable group and the reasons why they go missing are complex. ECPAT UK's research into the responsibility of government authorities in safeguarding these children has identified a number of key factors, of which two are highlighted in this paper.



Identification of trafficked children

Although a number of local authorities have set up guidance on child trafficking to identify and prevent children going missing, many cases still go undetected. Professionals must be able to respond to a wide variety of indicators of trafficking, including trafficking for sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude and forced marriage. The danger is that if child protection intervention is not immediate the young person will continue to be under the hold of the trafficker, making it impossible to remove her or him from the exploitative situation. The failure of authorities to identify these children as 'at risk of significant harm' leaves them highly vulnerable.

Accommodation and specialist support

Children who are at risk of going missing from local authority care have often been accommodated in unsupported, unsupervised accommodation. Children need to feel safe, they need the support of having someone to turn to at any time of the day or night. A comprehensive and specialist approach to their protection and long term support is necessary, which includes safe accommodation, specialist foster care, legal advice, qualified interpreters, access to education, and physical and psychological health support.

International measures

Although other international measures exist, the *Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings* (CoE) (2005) is considered to be a standard bearer in the protection of trafficked persons. It entered into force on 1st February 2008. In Article 10 (1) it states that in each country relevant competent authorities should collaborate with each other to identify and assist women and child victims of trafficking, recognising their specific situation. As outlined above Article 12 (1) of the CoE requires States to introduce a range of holistic assistance measures for trafficking victims.

There are other articles of the CoE relevant to missing children. In Article 10 (3) it states that if a victim's age is uncertain he or she should be presumed to be a child until verified and not returned to a country where he or she would be at risk.

The immigration team at Birmingham airport swooped when they spotted six Chinese girls boarding a plane for Toronto. The suspicious-looking man travelling with them was wanted for trafficking offences in Singapore. The border officials stepped in to cut short his latest illegal trade. Then things started to go wrong.

The girls, aged 16-17, were taken into local authority care for their own protection. Within three days, three of them were missing, then four. Two more had been housed with foster parents, but after nine months the youngest was gone. She eventually came back, but refused to say what happened to her. The other four have not been seen since.

It is one of hundreds of cases where foreign children alone in the UK – many believed to be victims of trafficking – have been rescued from exploitation by the authorities, only to fall back into danger when the same authorities lose them.

"Saved from child traffickers, but not for long"
The Guardian, April 2008 (This case first appeared in ECPAT UK's "Missing Out" research report)

In addition, the CoE specifically notes in Article 33 (2) the need for international cooperation "in the search for missing people, in particular for missing children, if the information available leads them to believe that she/he is a victim of trafficking in human beings. To this end, the Parties may conclude bilateral or multilateral treaties with each other".

Article 10 (4) of the CoE obliges States to provide measures when they deal with cases of child victims of trafficking who are unaccompanied children. Hence, States must provide for the "representation of the child by a legal guardian, organisation or authority which shall act in the best interests of that child". The appointed guardian should support the child in their legal, practical and emotional needs and advocate on their behalf from the moment of identification to ensure actions are taken in the child's best interests until a durable solution is found.

For further information or to contribute details of your experience or country context, contact:

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