

HEADING BACK TO HARM

A study on trafficked and unaccompanied children going missing from care in the UK

Executive summary

Research context

Child victims of trafficking are at high risk of going missing.¹⁶ Despite this, concerns have been raised about a lack of awareness and recognition of child trafficking among practitioners.¹⁷ The European police agency, Europol, recently warned that there are as many as 10,000 ‘missing’ or unaccounted for unaccompanied children in the European Union, which has drawn attention to those under 18 who are known to be ‘particularly vulnerable’¹⁸ to trafficking and exploitation. The vulnerability of unaccompanied children from abroad who are in the UK is often increased by a lack of knowledge or integration into their new environment, and by being subject to child protection, immigration and law enforcement responses.¹⁹ This research attempts to quantify the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and children who may be trafficked in the UK care system, as well as the number who go missing from care.

Through this year-long study, ECPAT UK and Missing People have discovered that an alarmingly high number of both unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and children who may have been trafficked go missing from care. Many have not been found. Local authorities with responsibility for the care of these children are frequently not able to report how many unaccompanied and trafficked children are in their care, and many failed to identify any child trafficking victims.

Poor data collection and recording at a local level is deeply concerning and suggests that the UK’s wider child protection response to child victims of trafficking, in particular, is inadequate. We have found that there is much more that could be done to keep these children ‘visible’ in the system, to prevent them from going missing and to respond effectively in order to keep them safe from further harm.

Heading back to harm reveals that, from September 2014 to September 2015, **28% of trafficked children (167 children)** in care and **13% of unaccompanied children (593 children)** in care went missing at least once. Of these, **207** missing trafficked or unaccompanied children had not been found.

This research has identified a worrying lack of consistency in the way in which local authorities identify and record risk of trafficking and exploitation. Identification of trafficking is also a challenge in the UK at local level, despite the creation in 2009 of a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) to identify victims. Therefore, the true number of trafficked and unaccompanied children going missing is likely to be far higher than our findings suggest.

¹⁶ Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP). (2010). *Strategic Threat Assessment: Child Trafficking in the UK*. Available at: https://www.ceop.police.uk/Documents/ceopdocs/Child_Trafficking_Strategic_Threat_Assessment_2010_NPM_Final.pdf

¹⁷ Refugee Council and The Children’s Society. (2013). *Still at Risk? A review of support for trafficked children*. Available at: https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0002/9408/Still_at_Risk-Report-final.pdf

¹⁸ Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims. (2011).

¹⁹ Missing Children Europe. (2016). *SUMMIT Handbook: Practical guidance on preventing and responding to unaccompanied children going missing*. Available at: <http://missingchildreneurope.eu/Portals/0/Docs/Practical%20guidance%20on%20preventing%20and%20responding%20to%20unaccompanied%20children%20going%20missing.pdf>

Methodology

Heading back to harm aims to discover how many trafficked and unaccompanied children have gone missing from care in the UK – and why – using four approaches to data collection:

- 1. Data requests to 217 local authorities across the UK** (under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000) asking how many trafficked or unaccompanied children went missing from care in the year to September 2015
- 2. Two workshops with young people who have been child victims of trafficking**
- 3. Roundtable with multi-agency frontline practitioners**
- 4. Online survey of practitioners and policymakers**

Key findings

Numbers of children identified/suspected as trafficked and unaccompanied children in care in the UK, Sept 2014-15

590

Children identified/suspected as trafficked

4,744

Unaccompanied children

- London, the South East, East Anglia and the East and West Midlands accounted for **75% (445)** of the 590 trafficked children and **90% (4,267)** of the total 4,744 of unaccompanied children.
- Other areas of the UK reported lower numbers, including:
 - **14** trafficked and **57** unaccompanied children in care in Wales
 - **13** trafficked and **20** unaccompanied children in care in Northern Ireland
 - **48** trafficked and **150** unaccompanied children in care in Scotland
- Responses from London authorities showed considerable variance between boroughs. Despite London being a key destination for human traffickers, **10 of 33** London authorities reported no trafficked children and a further 4 could provide no information. This prompts concerns about low identification, training and recording practices in these areas.

Trafficked and unaccompanied children missing from care

- **28% (167)** of the 590 children suspected or identified as trafficked went missing at least once, from 39 UK local authorities. In comparison, previous research has estimated that around one in 10 of all children go missing before the age of 16.²⁰ The highest number of trafficked children reported as missing from one local authority was **22** (the mean average was 4 across the 39 authorities who reported missing children).
- Of the 4,744 unaccompanied children, **13% (593)** went missing at least once, from 74 local authorities. One authority reported **190 (19%)** of their 985 unaccompanied children having gone missing.
- The data reveals **331** missing incidents for the 167 trafficked children who went missing, and **994** incidents for the 593 unaccompanied children who went missing. Both equate to a rate of around **2.4 incidents per child**.
- Local authorities in Wales reported that **none** of their 14 trafficked children and **2** of their 57 unaccompanied children went missing (1 permanently). Scotland reported that **2** of 48 trafficked children and **3** of 150 unaccompanied children went missing (1 permanently). In Northern Ireland, **7** out of 13 children identified/suspected as trafficked went missing and **2** out of 20 unaccompanied children went missing.

Duration of missing episodes

- Trafficked and unaccompanied children go missing for longer periods than other missing children. Nationally, previous research has shown that just 2% of missing children are away for more than a week.²¹ Yet *Heading back to harm* shows that **around a third** of trafficked and unaccompanied children **are missing for more than a week**.
- 45 local authorities provided information on how many missing trafficked and unaccompanied children remained unfound. Across these 45 authorities, **207** trafficked or unaccompanied children were unaccounted for and missing. The highest number in a single authority was **53** children.

Nationality

- Only 10 local authorities were able to provide detailed information about nationality. From these areas, the highest recorded numbers were from **Vietnam** (12 children) and the second highest **British** (10 children).
- **60%** of respondents to our survey of professionals thought a trafficked child's nationality had a bearing on how likely they were to go missing. And **45%** believed it had an impact on the likelihood of an unaccompanied asylum seeking child going missing.

²⁰ Rees, G. (2011). *Still Running 3: Early findings from our third national survey of young runaways, 2011*. Available at: http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/u32/still-running_3_report.pdf

²¹ National Crime Agency Missing Persons Bureau. (2016). *Missing Persons Data Report 2015-16*. Available at: <http://missingpersons.police.uk/en/resources/missing-persons-data-report-2015-16>

Reasons for going missing

We asked both young people and respondents to our survey of professionals to tell us why trafficked and unaccompanied children go missing from care. They suggested the following reasons, in descending order:

Young people's views

- Control/influence of traffickers
 - Lack of trust in adults who are there to keep you safe
 - Lack of consistent support from a trusted individual, such as an independent advocate or guardian
 - Lack of connection with foster carers
 - Feeling isolated, like you don't belong
 - Lack of engagement with school, social networks
 - Fear of not being believed, and maybe being deported
 - Uncertain immigration status
 - Stressful procedures, such as age assessments and official interviews
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Professionals' views

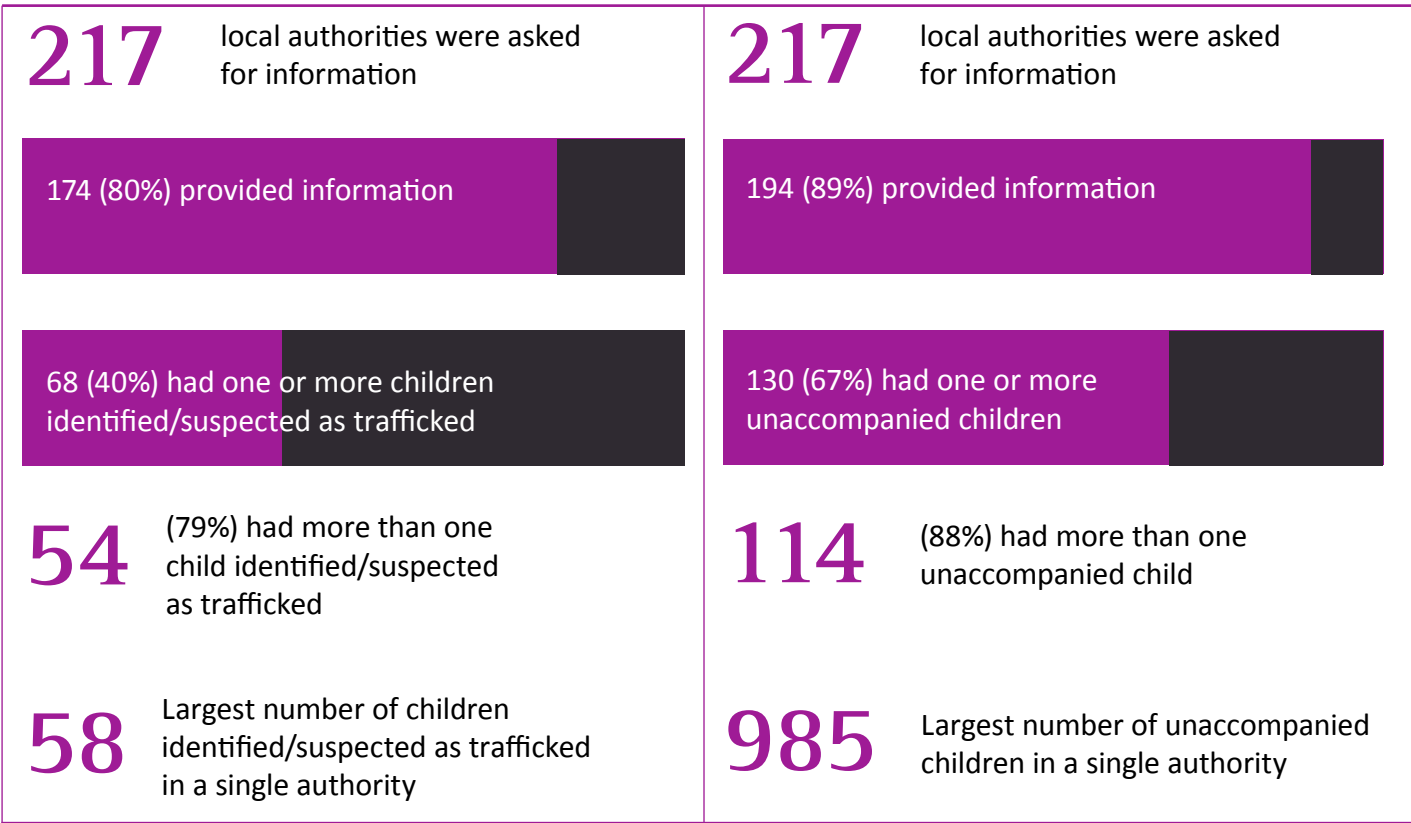
- Children not being identified as trafficked
 - Control/influence of traffickers
 - Unsuitable care placements
 - Lack of consistent support from a trusted individual/specialist support (including independent advocacy)
 - Poor protection measures
 - Asylum and immigration concerns (highest rated reason for unaccompanied children)
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Local authorities' ability to report

Children identified/suspected as trafficked, Sept 2014-15

Unaccompanied children, Sept 2014-15



Those councils that could not provide information cited an exemption to the Freedom of Information Act, which allows public bodies not to respond to requests where the cost of responding would *“exceed the appropriate limit”*²².

Many local authorities remain unable to report numbers from their area. The most common reason they gave for declining to respond was not having a searchable data field for trafficking on

case management systems. As a direct result of our data request, a number of local authorities have acknowledged shortcomings in their recording practice, and have committed to improve their systems accordingly.

Data collected from local authorities for this research should be considered in the context of known challenges around identifying victims of trafficking, training of frontline workers and inconsistent recording practices.

²² Freedom of Information Act. (2000).

Identification and age assessment

Not being identified as a potential victim of trafficking was found to be a key risk to a child going missing from care. Practitioners' low awareness and use of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) – the UK's framework for identifying victims of modern slavery and trafficking – was frequently cited as an issue for concern. The impact of a child not being identified as at risk or believed if they disclosed trafficking indicators was seen to compound their risk of going missing. In addition, this research indicates that disputes over age have a strong influence on whether a child feels believed by authorities and the trust developed with professionals. In addition, it can strongly influence the type of support and accommodation they receive, which, in turn, is thought to affect their risk of going missing from care.

Child sexual exploitation

British children are the third most prominent nationality recorded as trafficking victims in NRM data for 2015, and the second most reported group in our local authority data. The majority of this group are girls who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation.²³ The trafficking of UK children is often linked to child sexual exploitation, which can be both a cause and a consequence of going missing. From our study, 10 local authorities gave further information relating to the nationality or gender of children identified or suspected of being trafficked who had gone missing and, from this data, British children were the second most commonly identified nationality.

A perception that white British girls were more vulnerable to going or staying missing was strongly evident in the survey of professionals, although 42% of the respondents stated that British children were, in their experience, 'rarely' or 'never' recorded as trafficked. It appears that many British victims of child sexual exploitation (CSE) are not being referred to the NRM and being identified as victims of trafficking. This may be due to a lack of understanding of the definition of trafficking, with many practitioners thinking it affects only those who cross international borders.

County lines

In recent years the identification of 'county lines' (drug supply networks extending out from cities to smaller towns or coastal resorts) has started to be viewed as potential child trafficking.²⁴ While these children are involved in criminal activity, they may also be in exploitative situations whereby older people give them 'payment' of some sort in return for this criminal activity or pressure/groom them to be involved. Local authority respondents to our survey identified this issue as a gap in their knowledge.

Criminalisation

There was a perception amongst our survey respondents that being criminalised (for example, being arrested or prosecuted) makes trafficked children more likely to go missing. 65% of respondents from the not-for-profit sector and 38% from the criminal justice sector agreed that criminalisation 'usually' or 'sometimes' has an impact. Concern was raised that the children's criminality was prioritised over their vulnerability, both in terms of preventing missing but also after the child had gone missing and during the missing investigation.

²³ National Crime Agency. (2016). *National Referral Mechanism – End of Year Summary 2015*. Available at: <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/676-national-referral-mechanism-statistics-end-of-year-summary-2015/file>

²⁴ Sturrock, R. and Holmes, L. (2015). *Running the Risks: The links between gang involvement and young people going missing*. Catch 22 and Missing People. Available at: <https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/runningtherisks>

Summary of recommendations

As a result both of the data collection and data analysis for this project, we make three sets of recommendations: creating a culture of trust; responding to risk; and taking a coordinated approach. Further detail on each recommendation is outlined in the main report.

1. Creating a culture of trust

Recommendation 1: Child-specific training for professionals and carers to address the lack of awareness of the issues and risks faced by trafficked, unaccompanied and separated children. To ensure that care providers understand and respond to the needs of children effectively, frontline professionals working with children must be trained to an appropriate level with child protection training on trafficking/modern slavery.

Recommendation 2: Building a culture of trust with trafficked, unaccompanied and separated children to prevent them going missing by ensuring that a child's first and subsequent encounters with agencies and services are supportive and that next steps are clearly explained, including provision of peer support and regard to their cultural needs.

Recommendation 3: Independent Child Trafficking Advocates or Guardians must be urgently rolled out nationally to ensure an effective national system of legal, independent guardianship for all of these children across the UK, which will protect their rights and promote their wellbeing.

2. Responding to risk

Recommendation 4: Safe and appropriate accommodation/placements should be resourced and available for all trafficked, unaccompanied and separated children, in order to build trust, promote wellbeing and prevent missing incidents.

Safety planning must include young people from the beginning. In addition, the Government must publish detailed plans and a timetable for an independent review of local authority support for all trafficked children.

Recommendation 5: Risk assessment by statutory agencies must be thorough, timely and responsive, and shared appropriately with relevant agencies, both to inform care planning and to guide the response to missing incidents for all trafficked, unaccompanied and separated children. All trafficked, unaccompanied and separated children who go missing must be assigned a 'high-risk' status, regardless of any ongoing criminal investigation. Those turning 18 must not be deprioritised.

3. Taking a coordinated approach

Recommendation 6: Improved data recording and reporting to ensure that patterns and prevalence of trafficked, unaccompanied and separated children going missing from care are monitored locally, regionally and nationally to inform resource allocation, risk management and effective responses. The NRM must be reformed to ensure a child protection response to trafficking risk, as well as guaranteed specialist support for those identified as trafficked or at risk of trafficking.

Recommendation 7: National, regional and local coordination must take place in order to understand and respond to changes in the local, regional and national patterns of trafficked, unaccompanied and separated children going missing from care; statutory and voluntary agencies must work together effectively.