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SOC Business Area
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Intelligence Notification

Child trafficking for exploitation in forced criminal activities and forced begging

Children are one of the most vulnerable groups targeted for the trafficking in human beings (THB). Organised crime groups (OCGs) choose to traffic children as they can be easily recruited and quickly replaced. OCGs can also maintain child victims relatively cheaply and discreetly. The exploitation of children violates the human rights of children; to have a safe childhood in their family setting, to receive education, to have time to play and to be protected from exploitation.

Child trafficking involves the recruitment of victims, their transportation, transfer and harbouring of children for the purpose of exploitation. Coercion, violence or threats are not necessary elements in cases of child trafficking as children cannot consent.¹

Children are trafficked for the same purposes as adults: for sexual exploitation, for labour exploitation but also for exploitation in a range of criminal activities, including begging. This Intelligence Notification focuses on the exploitation of children forced into committing criminal activities and forced begging. The victims of these types of exploitation are frequently falsely identified as suspects rather than victims of THB.

Key trends

- It is often difficult to identify victims of trafficking in human beings. This is particularly true in cases of child trafficking.
- Cases of trafficking of children for exploitation in forced begging or in forced criminal activity are often falsely perceived as public order issues or petty property crimes.
- Children are at high risk of undergoing secondary victimisation by being considered perpetrators of petty crime rather than victims of exploitation. Child victims are also at risk of being re-trafficked after their release from the authorities.
- OCGs specifically target families in difficult social and economic circumstances.

Exploitation in forced criminal activity and forced begging

Child victims of THB are forced to engage in a wide range of criminal activities. These criminal activities include drugs crimes, different forms of property crime, social benefit fraud and organised begging. Many victims exploited as part of child trafficking are forced to commit different kinds of crime at the same time.

Recruitment and transportation

Minors are typically recruited from families in difficult economic circumstances. In some cases, children are sold by their families to the traffickers. Pregnant women are also sometimes recruited and forced to sell their babies. For trafficked children between the ages of 6 months and 10 years, OCGs can pay between EUR 4 000 and EUR 8 000. In some cases children have been sold for up to EUR 40 000. While illegal adoption does not necessarily constitute THB, in a number of cases illegally adopted children are trafficked for exploitation.

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Communities dispersed from their original countries of origin and established in the countries of exploitation are reported as major facilitators of this type of trafficking. Poverty, unemployment and social exclusion of these communities increase their susceptibility to debt and vulnerability to exploitation. Trafficking networks specifically target economically deprived families and use complicit money lenders to push them into debt. Extremely high interest rates prevent the families from paying off their debts and force them in an exploitative situation. Children are taken away from parents as a way to pay back incurred debts.

Moving children across controlled borders is relatively uncomplicated. In many cases, the victims travel on genuine passports of non-related adults. The OCGs involved in these types of exploitation are very mobile and typically active in several countries making use of contacts in diaspora communities.

Children exploited to commit property crime

Children are trafficked to be forced to commit different types of property crime, such as burglaries, robberies, shoplifting, cargo thefts, metal thefts, home-jackings or ATM theft.

In order to enforce obedience, the criminals intimidate their victims using threats of violence or deprivation (e.g. food deprivation) and different methods of psychological manipulation. The traffickers take away the childrens' personal documents, leaving them with a photocopy, in case of police controls. The victims are under the constant supervision of offenders.

Children exploited in forced begging

OCGs involved in trafficking children for forced begging specifically target vulnerable people such as children in orphanages, young adults with disabilities, or single mothers with children. Victims are under strict surveillance when begging and also forced to commit thefts.

Children exploited for benefit fraud

OCGs traffic families with several children or only children to the UK and register them under different addresses in order to exploit the social benefits system. In some case traffickers only use child victims' documents in order to obtain social benefits without trafficking them to the UK. These traffickers also open bank accounts in the name of their victims subsequently controlling the accounts and withdrawing the benefits payments received.

Children exploited in drug production and trafficking

Anti-Slavery International reports it is reported that Vietnamese minors are often exploited in cannabis production. 81% of the victims exploited are underage.

Opportunities for OCGs

Children are easily coerced and controlled in many different ways. Traffickers often do not need to resort to physical violence which would make the exploitation more visible. Children are more easily threatened and manipulated than adult victims of THB. OCG involved in child trafficking maintain constant surveillance of their victims and pressure them to evade law enforcement. Children easily escape from law enforcement enabling the traffickers to remain anonymous. Trafficked children do not consider themselves to be in an exploitative situation, but rather perceive their exploitation as loyalty to their family.

When trafficked children forced to commit crimes are apprehended by law enforcement, they are typically placed in childcare facilities from where they easily abscond. In other cases, the victims are handed back to their 'family' members or guardians and can then be re-trafficked.

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Challenges for law enforcement

Identifying victims of THB is a challenge in general. However, identifying child victims of THB is even more difficult. Practitioners often do not realise that exploitation in forced criminality is child abuse. Children forced to commit crimes are often treated as offenders. Often, these victims resist cooperation with law enforcement and are at risk of disappearing or to being re-trafficked if they are handed back to their exploiters. There is a clear need to continue raising awareness among law enforcement officers on the victim status of exploited children. The EU Trafficking Directive (2011/36) requires MS to implement non-punishment provisions: “Member States shall, in accordance with the basic principles of their legal systems, take the necessary measures to ensure that competent national authorities are entitled not to prosecute or impose penalties on victims of trafficking in human beings for their involvement in criminal activities which they have been compelled to commit as a direct consequence of being [trafficked]”.²

The use of threats, force or other forms of coercion are not required elements to establish cases of child trafficking. Children cannot give consent and their consent to an exploitative situation is considered irrelevant. However, this irrelevance of consent remains challenging to apply for law enforcement and the judiciary in cases of child trafficking, especially for teenagers and adolescents.³

Children often do not consider themselves as victims of exploitation further complicating their identification as victims rather than perpetrators. These victims perceive their exploitation as normal.

In addition to identifying child victims, it is often difficult to confirm the true personal details of the victims as they typically do not carry identification documents and make use of aliases. Adult organisers of child trafficking also often do not carry any identification documents, use numerous aliases, and exploit the possibility to legally change their names in their countries of origin. Some exploited children are born on the road and remain unregistered.

Cases involving children are too often dismissed due to a lacking strategic intelligence picture on the phenomenon. Links to organised crime involvement and organised trafficking in human beings are often not recognised or investigated. In order to establish an intelligence picture assessing the scale of the OCGs activities and to effectively combat this phenomenon investigations will have to extend beyond identifying child victims and target the family structures sustaining the trafficking and exploitation of children.

In some countries, the private sector (shop owners and private security firms) and law enforcement collaborate to address the involvement of children in shoplifting and stealing. These schemes involve the collection and systematic comparison of data on the adults picking up the child.⁴

Law enforcement agencies often focus on the most visible criminal activity such as property crime or cannabis production without exploring THB aspects. Even if victims of THB are identified, there is often no follow up on the trafficking aspect on the judicial level.

In the cases of exploitation in forced begging, interpretation of what actually constitutes the concept of begging may differ. There is no consensus as to what constitutes begging which may also include street art, street music or selling small items on the street.⁵

Conclusion

Child victims of trafficking in human beings are not easily identified. Types of exploitation other than sexual or labour exploitation are highly underreported. In order to better fight exploitation of minors for forced begging or forced criminal activities, it is necessary to increase the awareness of this phenomenon and increase cooperation between EU law enforcement agencies.

¹ International Labour Organisation, *Training Manual to Fight Trafficking in Children for Labour, Sexual and Other Forms of Exploitation*, Textbook 1, Geneva, 2009.

² EU Trafficking Directive (2011/36) Art. 8.

³ EU Trafficking Directive (2011/36) Art. 8 and Council of the Baltic Sea States, Child Centre, Expert Group for Cooperation on Children at Risk, *Children Trafficked for Exploitation in Begging and Criminality: A Challenge for Law Enforcement and Child Protection*, Lithuania, Poland, Norway and Sweden, 2013.

⁴ Council of the Baltic Sea States, Child Centre, Expert Group for Cooperation on Children at Risk, *Children Trafficked for Exploitation in Begging and Criminality: A Challenge for Law Enforcement and Child Protection*, Lithuania, Poland, Norway and Sweden, 2013.

⁵ *Ibid.*