

Human trafficking: Voluntary returns data

22nd August 2019

MORE THAN HALF OF POTENTIAL TRAFFICKING VICTIMS “VOLUNTARILY” LEAVING UK WERE HELD IN PRISON-LIKE SETTINGS

- More than half (53%) of potential trafficking victims opting to return did so after spending time in prison-like settings
- Charities warn of risks facing victims upon return, including re-trafficking, social exclusion and trafficker ‘revenge’ attacks
- 30+ organisations back [After Exploitation](#) calls for data transparency on victim outcomes, signing open letter and petition

New data published by data mapping project, **After Exploitation**, has found that more than half (53%) of potential trafficking victims who “voluntarily” left the UK last year did so after being held in immigration detention. As the detention of potential trafficking victims doubled in 2018, the number of voluntary returns also increased. The Home Office data obtained by [After Exploitation](#) shows that, in 2016, 1 in 5 (22%) potential trafficking victims recorded as “voluntarily returns” were removed after detention, 1 in 10 (11%) in 2017, and a significant five times as many in the following year (53%).

The data follows safeguarding concerns raised by charities around trafficking returns, after a report released by [After Exploitation](#) found that a number of recognised victims of trafficking have been deported since 2016. [Speaking to Thomson Reuters Foundation](#), organisations outlined risks facing deported trafficking victims, including re-trafficking, reprisals from traffickers, and social exclusion from family, friends and community due to stigma. The UK Government does not formally track the welfare of victims after return, which adds to the finality of voluntary and enforced return.

Human trafficking and slavery are recognised as a serious criminal offences, but victims who prove their case through the UK’s decision-making framework are not granted automatic protection from detention or deportation.

After Exploitation launches [its petition](#) today, in conjunction with more than 30 other organisations, asking for data on trafficking outcomes to be made public.

Director of After Exploitation, Maya Esslemont, said:

“Victims of human trafficking should be supported, so that they are in the best possible mental and physical health when deciding how they want to rebuild their lives. We are concerned that such a high portion of “voluntary” returns are taking place during or after time spent in prison-like settings. Victims should not have to choose between fear of UK authorities and fear of the risks facing them in the original site of exploitation.”

“We demand the Government monitor what happens to victims of trafficking upon return, and release data on trafficking support, detention and deportation outcomes.”

A number of charities have spoken to After Exploitation, raising concerns over the fact that victims of trafficking who come into contact with detention staff are more likely to return home than victims who do not.

Natasha Walter, Director of Women for Refugee Women, said:

“The women we meet who are being held in detention are not in a position to make life-changing decisions. Most of them are survivors of human rights abuses and are struggling to access the legal, medical and other support that would enable them to resolve their cases. How can returns made in these circumstances be seen as voluntary?”

Pierre Makhoul, Assistant Director at Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) said:

“The idea that people are making decisions ‘voluntarily’ to leave the UK after having experienced time in immigration detention is questionable given the experiences of people who have been trafficked and who may also have been re-traumatised by their experience of immigration detention. This raises serious concerns that vulnerable people are being coerced into going home through the punitive use of immigration detention. BID calls upon the new Home Secretary to immediately end the detention of victims of trafficking.”

Catherine Baker, Senior Campaigns Officer at ECPAT UK said:

‘The data revealed by After Exploitation highlights how being caught up in the UK’s complex and hostile immigration system can make trafficking victims even more vulnerable.

The young people we support at ECPAT UK are often terrified of being returned to their countries of origin when they become adults. Whilst return can sometimes be the right thing for them, it can also be a huge burden on them that prevents them from recovering.

Jane, a victim of child trafficking, told us: “Worrying about my future, about how I can’t work, I can’t study – affects my mental health.”*

Without data on long term outcomes for victims, including children, how can we measure the effectiveness of the UK’s response to trafficking? How can we understand whether or not these children have recovered from their exploitation, or whether they remain vulnerable and at risk?’

- ENDS -

Data source

Voluntarily returning potential victims of trafficking	2016	2017	2018	Total (3-year period)	Source
Returned after detention	4	2	23	29	https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/587648/response/1410528/attach/3/54439%20Esslemont.pdf?cookie_passthrough=1
Total	18	18	43	79	https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/572222/response/1387594/attach/3/53958%20Response%20Esslemont.pdf?cookie_passthrough=2
% of returns after detention	22%	11%	53%	36%	

About After Exploitation

After Exploitation is a data mapping project using Freedom of Information requests to understand what happens to victims of modern slavery, including human trafficking, when exploitation ends.

[About the petition](#)

A coalition of organisations are asking the UK Government to disclose what happens to victims of human trafficking after exploitation, including the outcomes of immigration claims, access to support, and the use of immigration detention or deportation. The petition launches on Thursday 22nd August on Change.org, and is open to the public to sign.

Current signatories are:

After Exploitation,
African Rainbow Family,
Anti Slavery International
AVID (Association for Visitors in Detention)
BID (Bail for Immigration Detainees),
CARAS,
Detention Action,
ECPAT,
Equality Now,
Ex-Detainee Project,
Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX),
Freedom United,
Gatwick Detainee Welfare Group,
Help Refugees,
Hope for Justice,
Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants,
Liberty,

*Lesbian Immigration Support Group,
Migrant Rights Network,
Migrant Voice,
Medical Justice,
New Horizons in British Islam,
Race on the Agenda,
RefuAid,
Rene Cassin,
Right to Remain,
Samphire,
Scottish Detainee Visitors,
Runnymede Trust,
UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group,
Women for Refugee Women*