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Citation: Harvey, Jackie, Hornsby, Robert and Sattar, Zebeida (2015) Disjointed Service: An English Case Study of Multi-Agency Provision in Tackling Child Trafficking. *British Journal of Criminology*, 55 (3). pp. 494-513. ISSN 0007-0955

Published by: Oxford University Press

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azu115> <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azu115>>

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DISJOINTED SERVICE: AN ENGLISH CASE STUDY OF MULTI-AGENCY PROVISION IN TACKLING CHILD TRAFFICKING

JACKIE H. HARVEY*, ROB A. HORNSBY and ZEIBEDA SATTAR

This article examines the issue of child trafficking in the United Kingdom and of multi-agency responses in tackling it. The United Kingdom, as a signatory to the recent trafficking protocols, is required to implement measures to identify and support potential victims of trafficking—via the National Referral Mechanism. Effective support for child victims is reliant on cooperation between agencies. Our regional case study contends that fragmented agency understandings of protocols and disjointed partnership approaches in service delivery means the trafficking of vulnerable children continues across the region. This article asserts that child trafficking in the United Kingdom, previously viewed as an isolated localized phenomenon, maybe far more widespread, revealing deficiencies in child protection services for vulnerable children.

Keywords: child trafficking, protocol, multi-agency

Introduction

The national response to the UK's National Crime Agency's (NCA) press release on 18 February 2014: 'sharp rise in UK child trafficking' *The Guardian* (Topping 2014), 'figures reveal extent of child sex trafficking' *The Independent* (Independent 2014) and 'rise in UK child trafficking' *The Times* (Ford 2014) shows that the issue of child trafficking has been forced beyond the confines of academic- and policy-oriented research to become a topic of public concern and increasing political intervention. Undoubtedly, media coverage has in part been in response to recent official inquiries into the trafficking and sexual exploitation of children in regions of the United Kingdom (see, e.g., Jay 2014). The current and much publicized inadequacies that have been exposed within UK regional strategies involving the safeguarding of vulnerable children is reflective of earlier research that argued 'partnership working' via consensus can be hampered as '...consensus can be difficult to achieve and put into place' (Levi 2004: 832). The complexity in combining distinct organizational objectives into a single strategy suggests that a commitment to partnership working within this arena may remain only hypothetically achievable.

This article reveals the dynamic and complex reality of multi-agency partnerships, in a Northern English city, in protecting vulnerable children from trafficking. It explores the responsibilities of a range of specialist agencies all of whom had a role in protecting vulnerable children from trafficking. The research draws on the individual experiences of professionals within a range of these partnership agencies including: law enforcement, children's and health services and the voluntary sector, all of whom were part of the regional multi-agency anti-trafficking group. The study provides a qualitative analysis of the views of these professionals reflecting their understanding of the

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strengths and weaknesses of multi-agency practice in order to identify gaps in service provision in relation to children trafficked into and within the region. In particular, it looks at the way in which the various agencies work alongside one another, identifying tensions arising from conflicting definitions of what constitutes both domestic and international trafficking and the resultant lack of clarity around child trafficking protocols that has impacted on policy, systems and operations. It further identifies the impact of budgetary constraints, confusion around inter-agency communication and reluctance for any single agency to assume lead agency accountability.

The article is arranged in four sections. First, it provides an account of the main legal apparatus implemented for the prevention of the trafficking of people with particular reference to child trafficking. The second section evaluates the agencies charged with safeguarding children across services in the United Kingdom. The third part presents the findings, under the headings ‘Organizational Myopia: Not Seeing the Wood for the Trees’ and ‘Is it Trafficking?—Problems with Definition’, describing the complex and disjointed partnership-dynamics based on the experiences of agency personnel that, despite evident individual commitment, indicate problems with the strategic approach to protecting vulnerable children. Lastly, we review the overall contribution made. In the following subsection, a brief overview of the research approach is provided.

Method

This qualitative research aimed at gaining an understanding of the operation of the multi-agency safeguarding children network operating in the City and, from the viewpoint of our respondents, assess and identify gaps in that service provision. Data were collected over a 5-month period during which time we conducted 17 semi-structured interviews each lasting approximately 90 minutes,¹ augmented by attendance at an organizational workshop involving child protection agencies. This generated 25 hours of recordings and 233 pages of transcript, which were analyzed to generate overarching themes. Given the sensitivity of the subject, it was anticipated that access to respondents would be difficult. For example, on occasion it was necessary to meet with a gatekeeper who would assess the validity and conviction they had in the research before allowing us access to other professionals. In line with our ethics approval, all respondents and the corresponding agencies have been provided with an anonymous identity. For analytical purposes, we have categorized the respective agencies under ‘statutory’ and ‘community and voluntary’ groupings.²

Amongst respondents, the terms ‘child services’, ‘safeguarding of children’ and ‘child welfare’ were used interchangeably, as were the idioms ‘multi-agency’ and ‘partnership’. Indeed, as noted by Atkinson *et al.* (2007), different agencies will have their own approaches and practice norms supported by an internal terminology and common understanding of meaning. We make no attempt to catalogue and define their vocabulary, but report the words as stated; hence, this article applies these terms interchangeably.

¹ Thirteen were tape recorded, the remainder requested not to be taped but consented to notes being taken.

² The statutory agency respondents are coded as: N1, N2, N3, N4, N5, N8, N9, N10, N11, N14, N15 and N17. The community and voluntary agency respondents are coded as: N6, N7, N12, N13 and N16.

Protecting Vulnerable Children from Harm: Legal and Institutional Framework

The first universally agreed definition of human trafficking was provided by the United Nations Protocol, to ‘Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Organised Crime’,³ (United Nations 2000) and is the one selected for this work:

‘Trafficking in persons’ shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs. (UN General Assembly 2000 Article 3 (a))

In brief, the above definition contains three interrelated yet distinct elements. The first concerns the ‘act’ or ‘action’ of the criminals and includes the recruitment, transportation and transfer of persons; the second element is the ‘means’ aspect (relating to threat, force and coercion); finally, the third element refers to exploitation and attempts to explain the purpose and reason why criminals carry out these activities. As set out in Article 3 (c), in cases of child trafficking the *means* element does not need to be present (Hope for Justice 2012). This protocol was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly Resolution 55/25 of 15 November 2000. Dempsey *et al.* (2012: 158) offer ‘a realistic albeit cynical explanation’ for the evident tardiness in member states’ adoption into national legislation of this comprehensive definition as by limiting the scope, the problem is smaller, requires fewer scarce resources and is thus less difficult to deal with where there is a lack of technical expertise.

It also has to be noted that complications arise where ‘trafficked’ people are labelled as ‘smuggled’ and the two terms become confused. Clearly, both involve the movement of individuals whether within national or across transnational borders—the distinction, as shown in the respective UN protocols, is that trafficking includes elements of coercion and exploitation (ECPAT 2007; Pearce *et al.* 2013). Child exploitation occurs at both global and local levels, between countries and/or areas within a country, with victims typically being subjected to multiple types of abuse, yet little academic empirical research has been conducted within the United Kingdom to assist in providing in-depth understanding of the criminal markets in the trafficking of children (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 1999; Morrison and Crosland 2000; Bruckert and Parent 2002; Kelly 2002; 2005; Shelley 2010; Kleemans 2011). This lack of data is further compounded by victims’ unwillingness to disclose information, to report their situation to the authorities to access assistance or to accept help and, therefore, its victims often remain as a ‘hidden population’ (International Organisation for Migration 2001; Joint Committee on Human Rights 2007; Serious Organized Crime Agency [SOCA] 2009; Jackson *et al.* 2010; Helfferich *et al.* 2011).

³ Annex II of The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, signed in Palermo, Italy, in December 2000. Annex III is the ‘Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air’.

The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings entered into force in the United Kingdom in April 2009.⁴ This requires the United Kingdom to implement measures enabling the identification of and support for the victims of trafficking, giving rise to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) framework to recognize ‘potential victims of trafficking’ (PVoT). However, despite these efforts, recent research within the United Kingdom on ‘caring services’ exposes a lack of awareness and understanding ‘about the signs and consequences of the trade in human beings’ (Eccleston 2013: 40). Furthermore, in May 2013, a review of the UK’s Sexual Offences Act 2003 (referred to as the *Davies Review*), stated that the myriad of policies and procedures aimed at eradicating trafficking in the United Kingdom essentially hindered efforts to prevent the sexual abuse of children in both the United Kingdom and abroad. In January 2014, the Home Secretary, Theresa May, introduced the Modern Slavery Bill (House of Commons 2014), to further support international efforts on anti-trafficking law and eradication of slavery from the United Kingdom.⁵

Penna and Kirby (2012: 488) highlight the entrepreneurial criminal as facilitating human trafficking activities as ‘profits from buying and selling women and children have attracted organized crime networks’ (also see Webb and Burrows 2009; Lui 2011) that Europol (2011: 4) observe to be ‘highly mobile and flexible groups operating in multiple jurisdictions and criminal sectors’. Indeed, as constituent European borders have enlarged, there has been an expansion of the informal, illegal markets and a blurring in the distinction between legal and illegal activities with a distinct clouding of definitional boundaries between the two (Kligman 2005; Hobbs 2013). Socio-economic adjustments related to globalization and neo-liberal capitalism have further entrenched insecurity in almost all contemporary societies (Nikolic-Ristanovic 2004) as in addition to organized crime, security is threatened by issues arising from poverty, political oppression and disease (Ruggiero 2003, Annan 2004; Menz and Cavides 2010). However, recently voiced and growing concerns at a political level around national security and uncontrolled or criminally led illegal immigration (often also involving people smuggling) inevitably deflects attention from victims to concerns, perceived or real, of the problems associated with unwarranted migration (Geddes 2005; Young and Quick 2005; Capdevila and Callaghan 2008; Maas 2010; Korsell *et al.* 2011, O’Connell Davidson 2013). Measures must, therefore, extend globally for effectiveness (Penna and Kirby 2012) with an increase of awareness of trafficking issues amongst police forces (and others) to avoid an emergent culture of tolerance (Markovska and Moore 2008). As observed by a spokesperson for ECPAT UK⁶: ‘Many front line police and local authority workers are just not aware of child trafficking and do not identify victims’ (The Daily Telegraph 2013).

Often the exploitation experience is identified as domestic servitude, forced marriage, indentured or slave labour and/or sexual exploitation. Although some identify these as typologies of child trafficking (Webb and Burrows 2009; Hope for Justice 2012; Home Office 2013), others have pointed towards the lack of clarity of the trafficking protocol definitions (Pearce *et al.* 2013: 11) as possibly explaining the under-reporting of child trafficking and of trafficking victims being misclassified (Bokhari 2008). In the

⁴ A copy is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/236093/8414.pdf.

⁵ Although this Bill is considered insufficient by some, see, for example, ‘Papal scholar calls for action on slavery: The United Kingdom’s draft Modern Slavery Bill is insufficient, Margaret Archer argues’ *Times Higher Education*, 16 October 2014, p. 17

⁶ ECPAT UK—End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes.

United Kingdom during 2013, the NCA's NRM revealed there were 609 victims of child trafficking, compared with 549 in 2012 (United Kingdom Human Trafficking Centre [UKHTC] 2013: 21–6) for girls, the most common form of trafficking was for sexual exploitation. This increase may reflect higher levels of illegal activity or, equally, greater awareness and thus reporting of the problem. The most common form of exploitation for boys was recorded as being for criminal activity; which was then followed by exploitation for labour purposes, followed by a smaller number for the purposes of sexual exploitation (NCA 2014: 25–32). Despite these rising numbers, it remains widely accepted that such estimates fail to reveal the true extent of child trafficking into and within the United Kingdom and alternatively represent just 'the tip of the iceberg' (Eccleston 2013: 40; BBC 2014). Indeed, as O'Connell Davidson intuitively argues: 'It is impossible to measure a phenomenon that defies standard and consistent definition and the definitional problems described should be enough on their own to make us extremely wary of all statistics on child trafficking (and trafficking more generally)' (2013: 1072).

Protecting Vulnerable Children from Harm: Agency Structure

Historically, the safeguarding of children has been spearheaded by the justice system in coordination with welfare services. Strategies have built upon partnership and multi-agency 'joined-up' working to implement a range of protocols designed to both identify perpetrators and, just as significantly, to support victims of trafficking activities (Goodey 2008). Yet, the very formation of these new forms of multi-agency responses to child migration and trafficking has presented 'a challenge for the traditional structure of child protection' (Home Office 2013: 12). The academic literature base on child trafficking is developing (Rigby and Whyte 2013) and several areas have been identified as requiring greater academic research (Davies and Ward 2012) to inform evidence-based policy development and practice to improve child protection. Aside from empirical work to raise awareness of effective identification and subsequent intervention on behalf of those subject to abuse; the authors include a call for more work on what constitutes 'effective inter-agency working to safeguard children' (ibid: 12). It is this area in particular that our article aims to address.

The intended aim of transferring the previously separate and independent UKHTC to join the now superseded SOCA was to centralize data and intelligence on human trafficking. However, we found from our respondents a suggestion that the trafficking issue had been 'buried' and that the priority of trafficking within SOCA was 'very low' [N13] and '[law enforcement] agencies UK wide have dragged their heels on the trafficking issue' [N1]. This view corresponds with earlier media reports that an '... apparent lack of proactive policing has bolstered Britain's reputation as a soft touch for traffickers who can operate without fear of being caught and prosecuted' (Townsend 2011: 10). The coalition Government's overhaul of law enforcement within England and Wales that resulted in the replacement of SOCA by the NCA in 2013⁷ is a disconcerting development as another of our respondents noted: '...nationally and locally this has led to a very serious reduction of expertise in the trafficking field' [N14], and referring to

⁷ The Crime and Courts Act, 2013, replaced SOCA by the NCA, which retains UKHTC as part of its Organized Crime Command.

the dismantling of expertise accumulated over a number of years that ‘...it was criminal that it was now so fragmented’ [N17] and this viewpoint is recurring elsewhere in the United Kingdom as highlighted by a number of recent studies (see, e.g., Jay 2014; Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills [Ofsted] 2014). The UKHTC states that it operates a strategic partnership in tackling human trafficking, working in conjunction with a range of partners including: police forces, government departments, the UK Border Agency (UKBA), the Gangmasters Licensing Authority, international agencies, charities and non-government organizations (NCA 2014). In 2013, the UKBA was separated into two distinct units: immigration and visa service; and an immigration law enforcement organization. Nevertheless, trafficking remains peripheral to their stated agency objective focused on the legality of entry into the United Kingdom.⁸ This disparity in the balance of organizational remits between enforcement and immigration issues, to that of identifying and supporting PVoT, can challenge effective inter-agency cooperation. Indeed, Pearce *et al.* (2013: 11) draw attention to such tensions revealing a dichotomy ‘between understanding trafficking of young people as an immigration issue as opposed to a child protection issue, as defined by the Protocol’. Yet, the ‘Safeguarding Children who may have been Trafficked: Practice Guidance’ protocol (HM Government 2011), which reflected more recent multi-agency policy developments; such as the introduction of the NRM, also stipulated the duty of UKBA to safeguard and endorse the welfare of children, with welfare issues overriding concerns with respect to migrant status. The victims of such exploitation are to be addressed within a proactive and ‘child-centered’ approach and such joint working practices to safeguard children should be undertaken and underpinned by ‘a strong commitment from leaders and senior managers, a shared understanding of the problem of sexual exploitation and the effective coordination by the LSCB⁹ for the area’ (HM Government 2011: 16). Similar challenges were identified in earlier local authority attempts to join up the operations of criminal justice and children’s service provisions (Craig *et al.* 2007) and in the delivery of multi-agency partnership approaches for comprehensive youth offending services in England and Wales (Youth Justice Board 2002; Burnett and Appleton 2004; Souhami 2007).

The NRM is jointly operated by two ‘competent authorities’, the Home Office, who generally deal with referrals from the immigration process, and the UKHTC, who deal with the police, local authorities and non-government organizations. The NRM requires decision making to be part of a two-step process that embraces both adults and children. There is a ‘first responder’ that includes designated representatives from the police, social and children services, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and Barnardos; all of whom are authorized to refer potential victims of human trafficking to the competent authorities.¹⁰ The second stage involves these competent authorities making a decision within a designated time period as to whether the child (or adult) has been the victim of trafficking (NCA 2014).

That trafficking is predominantly viewed as an enforcement responsibility raises concern inside police circles (discussed later) of a lack of accountability by other stakeholders, something that has historically placed constraints on police enforcement (Mathews

⁸Although in 2012, UKBA staff began to receive training to identify possible victims of trafficking within the United Kingdom (<http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/aboutus/> accessed 29 January 2012).

⁹Local Safeguarding Children Board.

¹⁰Solace (2009: 36) provides a useful table of these potential points of first contact.

2005: 881). A recent report by the Institute for Public Policy Research (Cherti and Balam 2013) was critical of the NRM, citing evidence from the *Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Human Trafficking* (2012) of its failure to provide accurate information of victims of known trafficking cases. This is a deficiency acknowledged by the UKHTC (Cherti and Balam 2013: 7), and historically, such deficiencies in the sharing of intelligence between partnership agencies has long been recognized as hindering effective multi-agency working (Sampson *et al.* 1988; Liddle and Gelsthorpe 1994).

Similarly, ECPAT UK (2013)¹¹ has been critical of the operation of the NRM framework, particularly with respect to children who have been trafficked, expressing concerns that their immediate short-term needs are neglected during the identification process. They argue that more rigorous training and monitoring of first responders would increase effectiveness, a point also picked up by Brysk (2010). These difficulties and contradictions surrounding the NRM are reflected in our research, where the majority of practitioners interviewed had either no knowledge or a very sketchy understanding of the reporting strategy. Indeed one respondent [N4] specifically stated that the NRM was seen by many as an immigration tool being deployed by UKBA to deport rather than protect PVoT, similarly, ‘.....immigration weren’t going to do anything else but send her back’ [N12]. In sharp contrast, our respondent N17, who had been responsible for implementation of the NRM within the area was very positive about the process, praising the NRM as proving to be an excellent system that not only enabled victims to be supported but facilitated reporting and sharing of cases. That we found such clear contradiction in our sample does point to failure in inter-agency communication.

Organizational Myopia: Not Seeing the Wood for the Trees

Discussion of this first main theme identified within our analysis is organized within the following subheadings:

- In the box marked ‘Do not open: Too difficult to handle’;
- Empty Pages: Were they or were they not trafficked? and
- Disordered delivery.

There is no blueprint for multi-agency working and challenges arise largely as a result of the complexities involved in collaborative ventures (Sampson *et al.* 1988; Burnett and Appleton 2004; Richardson and Asthana 2006; Atkinson *et al.* 2007). Previous research suggests cooperation, coordination and collaboration between multi-agency partnerships is not only required (Cheminais 2009) but also then successful in tackling child trafficking (Hakes 2010; Pearce 2014; Ofsted 2014). Within our own study, we identified a persistent and significant lack of clarity and cooperation amongst stakeholders and personnel (being identified by 11 of our interviewees), arising from organizational boundaries specifically in terms of roles and responsibilities and as to who does ‘what’ and with ‘whom’. It is these dynamics we attempt to unfold.

¹¹ ECPAT UK represents a coalition of leading charities within the United Kingdom including: Anti-Slavery International, Barnardo’s, Jubilee Campaign, NSPCC, Save the Children UK, The Body Shop Foundation, The Children’s Society, UNICEF UK and World Vision UK.

In the box marked 'Do not open: Too difficult to handle'

More than half of the respondents observed a heightened sensitivity in relation to child trafficking on the back of the ECPAT UK research in 2007 (Candappa 2007). In response to the failing identified by the report, initiatives were developed locally to address child trafficking. One such initiative was the creation of a Regional Anti-Trafficking Group that brought together provincial representatives from the police, UKBA, children's services, health services, education, local authority and community and voluntary sector organizations.

However, this strategic partnership was disbanded early in 2011. The statutory agency that had chaired the group had taken the decision to dissolve it as limited intelligence was coming through making it no longer viable to continue, although they were still committed to the remit, our respondent stated that they were '...meeting for meetings sake...' [N11]. In short, the child trafficking problem previously understood to have been a significant issue within the city, had seemingly vanished, or that 'exploitation is serious enough without attaching the trafficking label' [N6]. Our research suggests that a significant variation in the strategies adopted by the individual stakeholders had contributed to the apparent reduction in the number of referrals, removing it as an organizational priority despite the concerns of front-line staff (as revealed below). Indeed, nine of our respondents¹² stated that 'the numbers just weren't there' to keep child trafficking as a priority on the agendas of their individual organizations and that in times of fiscal constraint limited resources were prioritized to other areas. 'So, it isn't that it isn't happening in [name of town removed]... it just isn't up on the agenda' [N11 and N2], and:

I mean child trafficking is a difficult one – unless we force it as an issue and flag it up then people will be less likely to identify cases, but without any cases identified it is going to slip off focus; so it's a catch 22 situation [N11]

...they don't have a box [recording criteria] so how do they know? They aren't going to know about trafficking. It doesn't mean it isn't happening...it just means it literally isn't on the agenda here, no box, there aren't any services...' [N4]

Respondents talked about the lack of knowledge with regards to the work practice, expertise and remit of partner organizations, which if addressed could improve service delivery (N8, N9 and N10). A respondent from the statutory sector believed that child trafficking issues were not prioritized because of their complex and sensitive nature that simply proved too challenging—resulting in a failure to recognize its existence. It was unclear whether this was deliberate reflecting a desire not to add too already stretched capacity, or arose through ignorance and a lack of knowledge.

...I think social services everywhere are trying to manage a budget that is increasingly decreasing... and so there are inordinate pressures on social services, so, if there is a way of not having to do something because it isn't there...if you don't pick the stone up and look, then the stone will firmly stay there...[N12]¹³

By definition, a multi-agency approach should provide an interface for policy, systems and practice that are at the same time consistent and not repeatedly changing (Markovska and Moore 2008; Cheminais 2009; Pithouse *et al.* 2009) with Atkinson *et al.*

¹² N1, N2, N4, N11, N12, N13, N14, N15 and N17.

¹³ A point echoed by N1, N2, N4 and N11.

(2007) reinforcing the importance of resourcing, communication and efficient relationships for effective multi-agency working. Despite agreement on the need for inter-agency coordination, there is debate in the literature as to the efficacy of a Common Assessment Framework (CAF) in dealing with child protection issues that might give rise to the need for immediate action; with Pithouse *et al.* (2009) noting their ineffectiveness, while Cheminais (2009) argued that CAFs would facilitate information sharing in such circumstances. We found no evidence of their use within our study. The inevitable under-reporting arising from ‘not looking in the box’ implies that trafficking slips further down the agenda. It also suggests that trafficking cases potentially pass through the net and are not accurately collated within the City governance. In common with the observation of Dempsey *et al.* (2012), resourcing is a key issue, and in times of continuing fiscal austerity in an absence of manifest, ‘need’ resources were being diverted away from trafficking—‘if it isn’t on the agenda then they won’t divert time or money to it, that’s the thing’ [N4].¹⁴ However, those communicating information about children believed to be trafficked, appeared not to make use of formal protocols to make a referral as, the ‘normal child referral system within child services’ was ‘to call or pick up the phone’ [N11]. This is expanded further:

If you had any suspicion of it happening you would go down the normal child protection system.... there is no extra tier to deal with the complexities of this [trafficking] although there is a CAMHS¹⁵ nurse who ... has this particular remit for helping children who have been trafficked in the city. [N5]

There were other examples of individuals working within the various agencies who simply did not know what to do or who needed to be informed. An example was shared of a teacher facing a situation of a child being removed from the country for a forced marriage not knowing who to contact and ‘this was quite obviously outside their remit’ [N8]; a social worker facing the same situation with another young girl ‘wasn’t sure where to go’ [N12] indicating a lack of coordination at the front-line point of intervention:

They say “Well I worked with a child who raised significant issues related to trafficking”...But when I ask... “Did you do anything or register the case?” They say “no” because they weren’t sure or, they don’t know where to go to in the reporting process. [N4]

Yeah I mean something to be worked on [by] agencies is knowing who is responsible for what and who to contact it is yeah, a real gap, knowing who knows what and who needs to know what [N8]

Four respondents (N1, N2, N11 and N12) indicated agencies would rather not highlight trafficking as an issue thereby, avoiding responsibility and heading off criticism for dealing with a difficult issue ineffectively. To illustrate: ‘If an issue is a difficult one to manage and an uncomfortable one to deal with ...then people aren’t going to go looking for it, even if they know it is probably happening’ [N1]. This was reinforced by another interviewee:

You’ll go and ask them about trafficking and xxxxx [agency name removed] will say nothing. ...If it isn’t shouting at them-then let it go-we don’t have to address it...They are much easier left under the stone...They can’t be criticised for not dealing with something that isn’t there...[N12]

As recently revealed in other English regions, evidence has suggested that vulnerable children were already known to the authorities where ‘In just over a third of cases,

¹⁴ A point made by almost all our respondents.

¹⁵ Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

children affected by sexual exploitation were previously known to services because of child protection and neglect' (Coffey 2014; Jay 2014: 1; Pearce 2014: 165). Our research raised similar concerns:

In the six local authorities [regionally] you've got these Missing and Exploitation Groups ... designed to deal with the most risky missing persons. So that might be just 13 year olds frequently going missing and having sex with boyfriends, or, young persons who have been trafficked. But ... if I dip sampled every one of those groups for the last year, there are probably very few trafficking cases being discussed... [N15]

Then this family would disappear for months on end ...So a routine trigger went up throughout the system...and 8 months later we have a message from Great Ormond Street hospital. She had been picked up on the streets begging in London severely sun burned, dehydrated and emaciated...you know a 3 year old begging ... [N5]

As discussed by others, it is clearly imperative to grasp the shared sense-making of referrals amongst multi-agency networks within the 'roles and responsibilities of each individual agency', (Pithouse *et al.* 2009; Pearce 2014: 164), rather than expecting others to take the lead by 'not looking in the box marked too difficult to open'. Some of our community and voluntary organizations were of the view that the responsibility for identification of victims did not sit with them, '...For trafficking case we would go to the competent authority first and then take our lead from the police ... I think, the competent authority would take the lead' [N8]. And, 'Yeah, but the competent authorities had more intensive training on it [trafficking], so if anyone was identified as a victim they would interview them' [N10]. Rather and from their standpoints, that the 'lead' agency in cases of trafficking lay with the statutory agencies, namely, the police. For their part, however, the police said they needed cases of child trafficking to be reported and that they were frustrated by organizations declining to share information.¹⁶ They identified the need for a strategic model, which placed Children's Services, rather than themselves, at the centre of the network coordinating, collecting and disseminating information. This appears consistent with a study by Mathews (2005), who highlighted how enforcement agencies would like to see a 'shift from police' to 'policing' towards 'a more multi-faceted, multi-agency approach involving a range of different agencies and organisations. In this process, the police have increasingly devolved responsibility to other agencies...' (p. 893). Although it should be noted that this is in contrast to Garrett (2004), who identified the tendency of police to see themselves as 'lead agency'.

Empty pages: were they, or were they not trafficked?

When discussing victims trafficked from outside the United Kingdom for sexual exploitation, the case to which all our respondents referred to was that of the 'Chinese girls' identified as having been trafficked (ECPAT 2013) and found working in a brothel in the area. We infer this particular case was familiar due to the existence of the report but *not* as a result of knowledge from practice. Respondents felt comfortable talking about this case and readily identified the failings in provision that led to the girls 'going missing' from statutory care in the region and subsequently trafficked elsewhere in

¹⁶ N5 and N12 noted schools hiding behind confidentiality as they did not wish to highlight issues that might damage their reputation.

England. This was also referred to as the ‘only’ case of *international* trafficking in the region, which in light of the evidence that our respondents went onto discuss, suggests a lack of understanding of how trafficking is defined. In consequence, cases where mis-labelled as child protection [N5] or child exploitation [N12]. The latter went on to comment:

But we keep our eyes out for any situations with women and children...I don’t know how much investigation goes into finding out, but the cannabis farms are very much a clear trafficked situation. [N12]

Knowledge of *internal* or *domestic* trafficking appeared more prevalent, with cases of children being moved across the country for begging (N5 and N17), domestic servitude (N5, N12 and N17) and benefit fraud where minors disappeared from ‘known’ families and were relocated to other carers (N5, N8, N9, N10 and N12). In terms of the latter, the transposable commodification of young children for monetary gain was referred to as ‘child swapping’:

Child swapping was going on, claiming asylum support purposes; people were lending children to claim more money, we turn up and there are supposed to be four children.... Whenever you tried to meet with the whole family there was never the right amount of people, I mean ever’ [N13]

Consistent with other recent reports (see, e.g., Coffey 2014; Jay 2014; NCA 2014), the majority of examples shared by our research participants focused on internal trafficking for sexual exploitation; with compelling evidence from both statutory and community and voluntary agencies of young people (mainly female) being targeted and sexually exploited in the City.¹⁷ Key features of these cases were that the girls had problems at home, were or had been in the care system, being widely referred to as ‘vulnerable’, were under-age and were generally of white British ethnicity. These characteristics appear to be wholly consistent with other academic studies where ‘fieldworkers describe a hidden but widespread problem with wide-reaching implications’ (Cockbain *et al.* 2012: 144) and with those presented in the recent reports by both Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (2013) and Jay (2014). Within our own research, the implications were that the perpetrators of the grooming and exploitation were all identified by our respondents as being from the asylum seeking community in the City. However, when discussing this and cases of forced marriage (discussed below), there was evident sensitivity on the emergent focus on ethnicity, as two of our respondents suggested: ‘We shouldn’t let political correctness lead us to moral blindness’ [N16] and ‘we even said ... how come it took [sic] a potential race issue to put it on the front page when this has been happening to kids for decades’ [N12].

Disordered delivery

A lack of intelligence and information sharing in and between agencies has long been established as one of the challenges of inter-agency partnership approaches (Richardson and Asthana 2006; Atkinson *et al.* 2007) as agencies within such frameworks often employ a standalone ‘stovepipe’ system that ‘silos’ rather than shares information/intelligence (Jago and Pearce 2008; Solace 2009).

¹⁷ This concern of internal sexual trafficking of under-age girls within the City was expressed to us by N1, N6, N8, N9, N10, N11, N12, N14, N15 and N17.

As one agency worker suggested:

We rely on information from other agencies and that's the Border Agency, Health or local authority...because if we don't find out from those agencies we don't know unless it's a very unusual case. ... Of everything that's wrong with the world what we find with strategies and protocols is that unless they actually work and they are filtered down to the front line and people know how to operate within them, they don't achieve a great deal. [N15]

Previous research into these complex working relationships have consistently revealed that operational tensions within multi-agency partnerships can undermine 'cohesive' approaches in protecting vulnerable children. Examples of the challenges faced, and those replicated in our own study, reveal uncertainties over local authority structures and organizational boundaries (Scriven 1995), a lack of common practice language and of joint training techniques (Scrie 1989), of conflicting agency aims and objectives (Bloxham 1996), staffing levels and appropriate time-investment (Normington and Kyriacou 1994), budgetary and financing restraints (Capey 1997) and confidentiality and information sharing protocol issues (Cheminais 2009).

As the above respondent (N15) indicates, role demarcation within joint-agency partnerships appear to work against, rather than support, efforts to counter child trafficking, and this finding ties closely to a number of studies previously conducted (see, e.g., Carpenter *et al.* 2005; Frost and Lloyd 2006). Although Atkinson *et al.* (2007) argue that role demarcation and organizational (and individual) tension in terms of professional recognition is significant, our findings suggest that it was at the organizational level, rather than at the level of the individual front-line professional, where cooperation needed to be improved. Clearly, each respective agency has its distinct priorities directing application of resources and training, with training in particular, directed by internal priorities in isolation from the needs or objectives of their partner organizations. Thus, knowledge and approaches to working practices are not embedded within institutional protocols but instead acquired via individual relationships by front-line workers, described to us (N5) as placing a reliance on tacit localized familiarity. This suggests that trafficking protocols appear to have receded within the City. Our respondents suggested an urgent need to establish an inter-agency group, where professionals working at the grass roots could meet and exchange information (N1, N5, N14 and N15). Given that the regional grouping had only just been disbanded when we undertook our study, the (de)prioritization of trafficking at the strategic level appears at odds with the views of those in the field.

...with trafficking we can't even get it on the first rung that's the frustrating bit for me. If we got it on the first rung and got the information in, it might throw up a massive problem but we could start to try and get it solved, and by this I mean the agency partners [N7]

Unravelling the ways in which the agencies come together requires further assessment concerning the powers of the previously identified competent authorities. We discuss different perceptions of what constitutes trafficking in the next section, prior to that it should be noted that sometimes the agencies demonstrate jarringly different perspectives and internal cultures, which contribute to an absence of trust. Where this occurs, the necessary interpersonal relationships are seen to fail:

So I think Immigration and Border Agency could be improved in their understanding of trafficking: What it is, and what someone goes through, that could be greatly improved; because the voluntary

services, they are the services that are providing the wrap around service and they really get it. But when it goes to the Border Agency that's where the barrier is and that's where the lack of understanding is. So from that angle things could be much better...[N12]

As previously identified by Community and Voluntary agencies, when human rights issues, breaches of confidentiality or data protection were concerned, this could be given as reason for not reporting further:

I think with the health service they see a patient in front of them and they hide behind this data protection... and confidentiality issue...They don't see data protection as a mechanism to assist information sharing; which is what it was actually designed for. But for me, child protection and trafficking override all of that because it is a very serious crime but trying to get that across and convince people is really difficult. [N15]

Is it Trafficking?—Problems with Definition

Our study identified gaps in services and in knowledge levels relating to trafficking protocols that appeared to arise from definitional confusion—with only one respondent who had formerly worked for UKHTC speaking with confidence about what fell within the trafficking agenda. Agencies that appeared to work closely together (N6, N12 and N13) had very different definitions of internal trafficking. Indeed this confusion was seen by N17 as hampering progress towards supporting victims and targeting perpetrators. Others (N4 and N6) argued that the definition of 'trafficking' was now so wide and 'ever changing' leaving professionals struggling to keep abreast of the definitional vagary of trafficking protocols that it may be more useful to substitute a more general term of 'exploitation' for 'trafficking' (Iñiguez de Heredia 2008). Yet, as O'Connell Davidson (2013: 1073) argues, the term *exploitation* has its own 'politically charged, historically and cultural variable'. This constant conceptual shifting was picked up by another of our participants who commented: 'In the back end of 2009 more legislation came in ... so we spent pretty much the whole of last year getting to grips with what that actually meant and we've reviewed a lot of our internal practices' [N8].

Analysis of our data highlights the range of activities, attitudes and experiences that are linked, directly or indirectly to the definition and the concepts of human trafficking. To illustrate this point, we refer to agency personnel dealing with victims of forced marriages engaging with critical information that directly relates to trafficking. The information does not 'move' for the reasons discussed above, including issues of roles and responsibilities and confidentiality. This scenario is applicable to many other agencies and may arise from a shortfall in training (Pearce *et al.* 2013), more concerning, however, is the issue related to 'cultural barriers'. Indeed eight of our respondents¹⁸ representing both statutory and voluntary agencies gave examples of inappropriate cultural sensitivity referred to as 'clouding' agency responses. None of the cases involving forced marriage were described as trafficking but could have been incorrectly identified because of their inherent complexity and such cultural labelling. Similarly, and as already mentioned above, cases in relation to grooming were widely reported with concerns over the exploitation and abuse of children though mechanisms of internal

¹⁸ N2, N5, N6, N11, N12, N13, N16 and N17.

trafficking (N1, N6, N8, N9, N10, N11, N12, N14, N15 and N17) but were often ‘hushed off the agenda’ (N11 and N12) because of the considerable uneasiness in raising details of the ethnicities of perpetrators, an issue that has recently received significant reporting elsewhere (see, e.g., Coffey 2014; Jay 2014; Pidd 2014). Further investigation into this ‘clouding’ would demonstrate the extent such activities are relevant within the trafficking discourse.

There was a marked difference in the commitment and implementation of the Trafficking Protocol (United Nations 2000) within the agency framework, with the community and voluntary personnel providing greater detail and deeper knowledge of the implications of definitions, structure and issues young trafficked people faced:

Our definition is the movement of children from one area to another for the purposes of exploitation... So it needs to be say from xxxxx to xxxxx there has to be a physical boundary, ...We call it the ‘internal movement of children for the purposes of sexual exploitation’ ... if the young person has moved then the same dynamics of trafficked people from abroad take place ...they are disorientated, unsure where they are except they are speaking the same language. [N12]

Although many respondents were unsure of how to handle trafficking situations, one respondent (N11 cited above) questioned why agencies had to follow a protocol as a procedure when they could just ‘pick up the phone’ if they were concerned. He saw this as a positive and effective action, despite reliance on tacit knowledge’, similarly:

Now trafficking is an entirely different kettle of fish all together ... my view is we don’t understand it. We don’t understand the extent of it. If you are looking for inter-agency work and protocols they won’t be there and then you can probably conclude that is even if they are not there what is stopping people picking up the phone and doing the right thing? [N15]

Conclusion

This research found differing policy and practice on child trafficking amongst the different agencies in our study. Examples are provided from both the statutory and the community and voluntary sector of a ‘disordered delivery’ of service provision and a confused picture of what is, or is not, trafficking that have cumulatively impacted on a reduction in child trafficking case referrals. Shared definitions and delivery plans that are transparent and open to scrutiny may allow for a deeper understanding of the barriers that currently prevent referrals and prosecutions at local levels (Coffey 2014; Jay 2014).

A lack of strategic cohesion manifests in a desire from front-line professionals for protocols that senior management think are either already in place or no longer a priority, thus inter-agency cooperation is reliant on less sustainable tacit knowledge and personal contact. This research has found a lack of communication and information sharing amongst practitioners, and such gaps echo earlier findings from other parts of the United Kingdom (Solace 2009), which sometimes gave rise to mistrust with the belief that border security concerns could be prioritized over the welfare of the trafficked child, or that inappropriate data security or data confidentiality concerns would prevent movement of relevant intelligence. Despite evident individual agency effort, ‘it is not enough for one or two agencies to work hard within their own sphere’ (Jago *et al.* 2011: 27 as cited by Pearce 2014: 164). We cannot argue for anything less than a

partnership approach, yet we do recognize that ‘relations between agencies involved in multi-agency work are more straight forward [in theory] than they usually are in practice’ (Liddle and Gelsthorpe 1994: 2).

Earlier work has drawn attention to the ideological distinction between health and social care (Eccleston 2013) and law enforcement (Crawford 1999) that has hindered information sharing and clarity of interpretation around trafficking. This also emerged as ‘leading’ partner sovereignty (Burnett and Appleton 2004), although our findings suggested evident reluctance to assume such mantle, preferring to leave stones unturned whether to deflect possible criticism or due to lack of resources, the end result is lack of dialogue around inter-agency roles, responsibilities and relationships. Thus, instead of a reporting protocol that sees a single central agency coordinating and disseminating information, there alternatively operates a cluttering of incomprehensible, divergent and competing agendas.

As this study reveals, the key features of the disorganized service delivery within the region, expose a multitude of disjointed agendas in tackling the problem of child trafficking at both statutory and community and voluntary agency sectors. These enduring issues, which despite a clear unequivocal advocating of the multi-agency approach by both sectors, have impacted upon the cohesion of a strategic partnership approach. Such discordance can be summarized as: failings in communications/intelligence sharing; passive agency practices; data protection concerns; a lack of timely interventions; a distorted comprehension of conceptual trafficking definitions and understandings of protocols; competing agency priorities and under-resourcing.

This case study has revealed failures in the agency framework for the safeguarding of vulnerable children. Although it may be seen, with realistic limitations, as a localized viewpoint with findings specific to the participating agencies involved with this research, the shortcomings bear striking similarity to the recent disclosures of both Jay (2014) and Ofsted (2014) of systemic flaws that have recently emerged in England of entrenched local authority failings to protect vulnerable children from trafficking. Indeed, this may in part be as a result of the decision some councils had made ‘that they cannot support trafficked victims’ (Solace 2009: 15). There is an unequivocal need for cohesive multi-agency frameworks that have secured commitment at all levels that clarify roles and responsibilities, together with clear understanding of what constitutes ‘trafficking’. Such an approach will provide space for consensus to be reached around relative priorities from individual organizations that allow for focus on prevention of child trafficking. Without such cohesive partnership responses, the grim reality is that child trafficking/exploitation will continue to occur in towns and cities across this sceptred Isle, and despite the best efforts of those at the front-line charged with intervening and tackling such criminality, we can expect to witness still more grubby linen hung in full public view by English local authorities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Ms Deborah Booth who worked as a research assistant on the project in 2011 and who collected and transcribed the primary data. We also thank the two anonymous reviewers who provided insightful and constructive criticism—the revised version is far stronger due to them.

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