

The problem of human trafficking in the European Union

SUMMARY

Although "human trafficking" has been defined at international level and criminalised throughout the EU, little is known about what is a complex crime. The EU attracts large numbers of irregular migrants, some of whom are deceived or coerced into various forms of exploitation. Moreover, EU citizens themselves are often part of the trafficking process, either as victim or as perpetrator.

Whereas the prevalence of human trafficking in the EU is very difficult to assess, some estimates have been made on the basis of limited data. These point, among other things, to a high proportion of women among the victims of trafficking, especially as victims of sexual exploitation.

Trafficking networks are mostly composed of small, highly flexible groups specialised in particular criminal activities. However, some organised crime syndicates have managed to control the entire trafficking process from the source to the destination country in the EU. Whatever the structure of a network, the trafficking chain always includes certain activities, such as the recruitment, transport and harbouring of the victims.

Whilst sexual and labour exploitation are the most common forms of abuse, victims are also trafficked for several other purposes, such as forced begging or committing various criminal activities. Children are a particularly vulnerable category of victims and they may face all kinds of exploitation.



In this briefing:

- What is human trafficking and why is the EU concerned?
- Human trafficking in the EU in figures
- The perpetrators
- Exploitation
- Main references

What is human trafficking and why is the EU concerned?

A comprehensive definition

Human trafficking – also referred to as trafficking in human beings (THB) or trafficking in persons – is a complex phenomenon which takes various forms. Attempts have been made to find an internationally accepted definition, which culminated in the adoption of a THB-related [Protocol](#) to the 2000 UN [Convention against Transnational Organised Crime](#). The Protocol's descriptive definition is composed of three distinct elements:

- "The activity": the recruitment, transport, harbouring or receipt of persons,
- "The means" including the threat or use of force, deception, coercion or abuse of power, or of a position of vulnerability, and
- "The purpose": the exploitation of trafficked persons.

A criminal activity does not qualify as THB unless all these elements are present. In the case of child victims, however, a crime of trafficking does not have to involve the means mentioned above.

Human trafficking v. migrant smuggling

In practice however, it is often difficult to distinguish between human trafficking and **migrant smuggling**, i.e. services offered by smugglers to migrants wanting to cross a border illegally, in exchange for money or payment in kind. Traffickers may well use the same routes as smugglers, but their purpose is different as they aim to force or deceive their victims into an exploitative situation (e.g. forced prostitution). The distinction is blurred however if smugglers abuse their imbalanced relationship with migrants who may have no other choice but to accept some form of exploitation, such as unpaid labour to pay back the "cost" of their journey. Such situations bring migrant smuggling closer to, or even turn it into, trafficking.

A further element in which the two crimes differ is border crossing. Whereas smuggling necessarily entails crossing a border, and evading frontier controls, this is not always the case for trafficking. Some "**domestic**" or "**internal**" trafficking cases occur within one country or an area without internal borders.

Why the EU?

The EU's economic prosperity and political stability have made it one of the world's top destinations for international migrants. In January 2012, Eurostat [estimated](#) the EU-27 foreign population (people residing in EU-27 Member States with citizenship of a non-member country) at 20.7 million and the population born outside the Union at 33.0 million.

Whereas globalisation has led to increased awareness of the opportunities existing in other parts of the world, people from most of the rest of the world have very few possibilities to legally enter and work in developed countries, including the EU Member States. As a result, many migrants react positively when approached by someone offering to organise their passage to a better world. This vulnerability is easily exploited by human traffickers recruiting people, even in far-off poverty-stricken corners of the world. THB activities are encouraged by many other factors including high demand for sex services and the existence of a semi-legal market for poorly paid and easily manipulated manual labour in developed countries (including in the EU).

Human trafficking is therefore fuelled by the conjunction of persistent socio-economic inequality between the developed and developing worlds, increased mobility, restrictive migration policies and demand for cheap labour.

Within the EU, removing barriers to freedom of movement has increased transnational criminal activities, including THB. In particular, following the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, controls at borders with countries of origin and transit of human trafficking were either lifted (as in the case of Poland and Slovakia) or eased (Bulgaria and Romania). Moreover, the EU now has borders with third countries which are significant sources of trafficked persons, including Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkan countries.

All these elements explain the extent of human trafficking in the EU, a crime which continues to rise despite a comprehensive [international and EU response](#).

Human trafficking in the EU in figures

The scale of human trafficking in the EU is difficult to estimate as trafficking cases tend to be investigated or recorded as other forms of crime, such as migrant smuggling or labour-related offences. Europol [notes](#) however that THB, including internal (intra-EU) trafficking, has been a growing phenomenon. Various estimates point to several hundred thousand people being trafficked to or within the EU every year. However, as the EU Fundamental Rights Agency [puts](#) it, it is impossible to make even remotely accurate statements concerning the actual prevalence of THB.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [found](#) that victims from the poorer parts of Europe were trafficked mostly within the continent, and Eurostat has [confirmed](#) this tendency for the EU: between 2008 and 2010, of THB victims with EU citizenship, 74% of male victims and 66% of female victims were trafficked within the EU. In general, 61% of [identified or presumed victims](#) in the EU originated from EU Member States. Most of these were Romanian and Bulgarian.

THB in Europe is characterised by huge variety in victims' nationalities. In [Eurostat's sample](#), Nigeria and China were the two principal non-EU countries of origin between 2008 and 2010. It is interesting to note that Moldova, Albania and Ukraine were among the top 10 THB source countries in 2008, but not in the two following years which saw growing numbers from Latin and Central American countries. Another source indicated that the vast majority of African victims who are not trafficked within Africa and the Middle East end up in Western Europe.¹

While most THB victims in the EU are women, men are also exploited, especially through forced labour. The 2012 UNODC [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](#) presented the following gender and age profile of victims across the world in 2009: women – 59%, men – 14%, girls – 17% and boys – 10%. In Eurostat's sample, women accounted for 68%, men – 17%, girls – 12% and boys for 3% of the victims.

The perpetrators

A lucrative business

What attracts criminal organisations to human trafficking is a combination of very high profits and relatively low risk, in comparison to drug trafficking for example. In 2005, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) [estimated](#) that the annual profits of forced labour amounted to US\$44.3 billion per year, of which US\$31.6 billion was made through exploiting trafficked victims.

THB criminal groups: structure, composition and *modus operandi*

Human trafficking groups tend to be small and their activities often restricted to one stage in the trafficking process. This entails the need to cooperate with other groups providing particular "criminal services." THB groups are very flexible and easily adapt to changes in "supply" and "demand", as well as new approaches by law enforcement agencies. The core activities along the THB chain include recruitment and transport of victims, and, if needed, smuggling them across borders, as well as running "safe houses" in which victims are held and premises in which they are exploited.

Some Member States report the involvement of organised crime syndicates and networks controlling the entire trafficking process from recruitment through exploitation, including the provision of falsified documents, corruption and money laundering. Even though some of these groups may have a hierarchical structure, THB networks are in most cases composed of highly flexible and largely independent small groups, in line with [general trends](#) in organised crime in the EU. THB activities are therefore mostly undertaken through the cooperation of individual cells active in various countries.²

According to Europol, the most frequently reported groups undertaking THB in the EU are, in descending order, ethnic Roma, Nigerian, Romanian, Albanian-speaking, Russian, Chinese, Hungarian, Bulgarian and Turkish. Some of them – e.g. Albanian-speaking, ethnic Roma and Turkish groups are family or clan-based and thus very difficult to infiltrate. The Agency [considers](#) Bulgarian and Romanian (mostly of Roma ethnicity), Nigerian and Chinese groups as probably the most threatening to society as a whole.

Nigerian groups are by far the most important actors in the sex trade from West Africa to Europe. Drawing on an extensive network of small and largely independent cells, they are capable of controlling the entire trafficking chain and involve former victims in trafficking activities (see the section below).

Chinese organised-crime groups are mainly associated with labour exploitation, typically in restaurants or textile sweatshops. However, in recent years they have increasingly become involved in trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Both Nigerian and Chinese syndicates reportedly use debt bondage, an arrangement consisting of paying off a loan by labour instead of in cash. As exploitation proceeds, the initial debt may be inflated and the payment period prolonged by the traffickers.

Exploitation

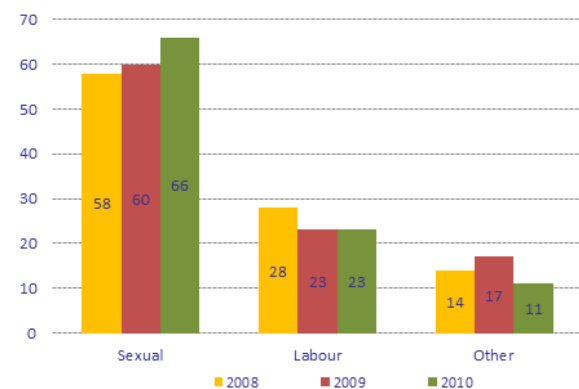
Trafficking for sexual and labour exploitation are by far the most common forms of THB in the EU (see figure 1). However, several other types of THB exist, including trafficking for the purpose of committing offences, such as benefit fraud, through the use of trafficked victims.

Sexual exploitation

Incidence

The above-mentioned Eurostat report, like many other datasets, presents sexual exploitation as the most common form of

Figure 1: Number of victims by form of exploitation (% of total number of victims).



Data source: [Eurostat](#), 2013

exploitation, the incidence of which rose in the reference period. This is not surprising, given that it has always attracted more attention from policy-makers, and has been criminalised throughout the EU for longer than other forms of exploitation related to THB, which perhaps still go undetected to a greater extent.

Recruitment

The trafficking process starts with recruitment; this normally entails some form of deception and is often undertaken by people of the same nationality or ethnic origin as the victim. Whether it is a "[loverboy](#)" feigning affection and building a person's trust, a fake employment agency promising an attractive job abroad or a matrimonial agency arranging a marriage with a foreigner, the victim has to be misled in some way into getting into an exploitative situation. Some victims may even knowingly accept a job in the sex industry, only to find out later what its actual nature and conditions are.

[Nigerian groups](#) stand out for the sophistication and cultural specificity of their recruitment techniques. The activity often involves family and friends of the victim. "Madams", operating both in Nigeria and in the destination country, are central figures in the trafficking process. In many cases they are former victims, which enables Nigerian crime syndicates to "self-reproduce." Oath-swearing rituals are used to strengthen the contract signed with the trafficker. The victim is sworn to repay the debt owed for the journey (by plane or by land, across the Sahara) and to remain silent about the contract; this practice may however be less important than some press reports in Europe seek to portray.³

The use of online services

The increase in use of the Internet both for the recruitment of victims and for arranging meetings with clients is one of the new trends in sexual exploitation. The use of online services poses a real challenge to police investigations. This trend seems very likely to continue.

Exploitation

What starts as a promising relationship or contract is in reality the beginning of a cycle of coercion and intimidation. Whilst Romanian and Western Balkan groups are notorious for being violent towards their victims, the tendency amongst most other trafficking rings is to reduce the level of violence. However, many women are raped by traffickers before being obliged to meet their first client. Victims' freedom to move is restricted, and drugs are used to create dependence and prevent escape.

One study revealed that 89% of victims were in a trafficking situation for more than one month and 20% for more than a year, often leading to serious physical and mental health problems.⁴

Labour exploitation

Labour exploitation is not a new phenomenon in the EU, and abuse has been reported involving both EU (e.g. [Polish](#), [Portuguese and British](#)) and non-EU (e.g. [Brazilian](#), [Eastern European](#) and [Asian](#)) migrant workers.⁵ However, the problem has come under the spotlight only recently, since for a long time it was believed to concern purely illegal markets and not to affect mainstream industries. Even now it often goes undetected due to workers being either unaware of the exploitative nature of their work or reluctant to turn to law enforcement (e.g. due to their unlawful or undocumented status).

Root causes

Labour exploitation in the EU has a systemic character. On the one hand, it is fuelled by irregular migration feeding the EU labour market with a cheap and easily exploitable

workforce having no recourse to any form of protection. On the other hand – it is [argued](#) – deregulation and increased flexibility of the labour market have created conditions favourable to the exploitation of workers. Goods and services are sold at prices which cannot possibly reflect production costs, and economies are made through cutting wages and lowering the standards of working conditions. In countries with well-developed labour inspection systems capable of enforcing labour laws, risks are passed on through [cascade subcontracting](#) to a whole range of very difficult to monitor, and often bogus, entities.⁶

In the EU, agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and domestic work are among the sectors most affected by trafficking for labour exploitation. In some of them, work is seasonal and employers repeatedly recruit and lay off (mostly low-skilled) workers who in turn are highly mobile and change employers more often than in other sectors. Therefore employers searching for flexibility in recruitment have to rely on recruitment agencies capable of providing a workforce at short notice.

Recruitment

In the EU, recruitment services are largely private, and the biggest private agencies refrain from recruiting migrants. This partly unregulated field has therefore been left to small companies active in both source and destination countries. Some of them operate on the verge of legality or are even effectively part of trafficking networks.⁷

Exploitation

The exploitation takes numerous forms including non-payment or deduction of wages and charging migrant workers exorbitant prices for (often imaginary) services provided by the traffickers, such as transport to the workplace, housing etc. It is interesting to note that most victims are not physically confined to their workplaces. Debt bondage arrangements, retention of identity documents and the absence of a work permit are often reason enough for the victim to remain in the exploitative situation.

Trafficking for benefit fraud

In its 2013 [Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment](#) (SOCTA), Europol stated that THB linked to benefit fraud had increased in the EU. Moreover, the Agency [predicted](#) that such fraud was likely to expand due to the large profits involved (with single trafficking groups earning as much as €125 000 per month) combined with a low perceived risk of detection. It also pointed to the use of trafficked children to support claims linked to family and housing benefits.

Reports originating from the UK provide a particularly detailed description of this form of trafficking, arguably attracting more interest among policy-makers and public bodies than in other Member States.

The extent of this phenomenon was presented in a 2010 [report](#) by [CEOP](#), part of the UK National Crime Agency. The report puts into question the widespread perception that benefit fraud is an economic crime whose only victim is the state, describing the use and abuse of children in committing benefit fraud.

Whereas benefit fraud is often committed without the need for the child to be physically present – or even to exist (e.g. through identity theft) – the report states that

ILO forced labour estimates

In 2012 the International Labour Organisation estimated that 20.9 million people worldwide, i.e. three out of every 1 000 persons were in forced labour at any given point in time between 2002 and 2011. The ratio for the developed economies and the EU (1.5 per 1 000 inhabitants) was the lowest in the world.

children are trafficked from overseas to enable the claiming of financial and housing benefits. The process often begins with a foreign child entering a private fostering relationship with an unrelated UK-based adult (acting on his or her own, or part of a criminal network). Children may then be given one or more false identities with benefits being claimed for each identity. There have been cases of benefits being claimed at the same time in several countries. Claimants of housing benefits can be subject to on-site controls by officials of the state, but they are usually informed of such visits in advance. This makes it possible to move children between addresses in various localities. The use of multiple identities for small children is facilitated through the fact that [EURODAC](#) (the EU database of fingerprints of asylum seekers and irregular immigrants) does not require the fingerprints of children under five years of age to be taken.

The UK Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) has [reported](#) on another type of exploitation related to social benefits, which it described as "benefit exploitation" in the more general category of "financial exploitation". It consists of forcing trafficked victims to claim social benefits to which they are entitled, and then to withhold the money from them. In some cases, victims awaiting a job promised to them by a trafficker were not even aware that their personal details were being used to claim benefits.

International protection and human trafficking

Identifying victims of trafficking among individuals applying for international protection or involved in forced return procedures is a challenging task. Victims may be very reluctant to provide evidence of exploitation to authorities for various reasons, such as fear or shame. Conversely, among asylum-seekers there may be individuals forced by traffickers to present false stories so as to legalise their stay, which makes further exploitation possible.

Whereas international protection in EU Member States is by definition not available to EU citizens, an example of possible abuses of the system is given by reported cases of Romanian asylum-seekers from the period preceding the country's accession to the EU. Individuals belonging to an extensive criminal network sought asylum using false documentation and then made fraudulent claims for financial benefits, e.g. by using multiple identities.

Chinese and Nigerian criminal groups are also known to make use of victims in abusing asylum procedures. One method consists of irregular migrants disposing of identity documents on arrival at EU airports, and then claiming asylum only to abscond during the evaluation of their claim.

Child trafficking

Child trafficking is a cross-cutting issue as children are victims of all the above-mentioned and other types of exploitation. The latter include trafficking in order to commit petty crime and begging, as evidenced by a recent [report](#) concerning Lithuania, Norway, Poland and Sweden. In some cases children are initially trafficked for one form of exploitation, only to be sold into another. All this may happen with parents being involved in the process.

There are numerous cases of Romani children being trafficked for various purposes⁸, which confirms the general tendency of ethnic Roma to be over-represented amongst trafficking victims. Certain cultural practices, such as exploitative begging involving minors, as well as forced and child marriages, are often linked to the trafficking of Roma. It is claimed that the existence of such practices increases the vulnerability of this ethnic group to human trafficking.⁹

Trafficking experiences have a serious impact on a child's physical health and emotional development, with reports citing post-traumatic stress disorder, drug abuse, self-harm and sexualised behaviour (e.g. voluntarily turning to prostitution) among the possible consequences.¹⁰

Main references

[Trafficking in human beings](#) / Eurostat, 2013.

[Trafficking in Human Beings in the European Union](#) / Europol, 2011.

[Forced labor: coercion and exploitation in the private economy](#) / B. Andrees and P. Belser, 2009.

Endnotes

¹ [Migrant smuggling: irregular migration from Asia and Africa to Europe](#) / A. Triandafyllidou and T. Maroukis, pp 177–194.

² [Trafficking in human beings in the European Union](#) / Europol, 2011, p. 6. See also [Human trafficking in Europe: character, causes and consequences](#) / G. Wylie and P. McRedmond, 2010, pp 184–187.

³ [Trafficking in women from Nigeria to Europe](#) / Migration Policy Institute, 2005.

⁴ [Stolen Smiles: Summary report on the physical and psychological health consequences of women and adolescents in Europe](#) / C. Zimmerman et al. The London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 2006, p. 1.

⁵ See also [Trafficking for forced labour in Europe](#) / Anti-Slavery International, 2006.

⁶ [Forced labour: coercion and exploitation in the private economy](#) / B. Andrees and P. Belser, 2009, pp 103-106. See also [Forced Labour & Trafficking in Europe: How people are trapped in, live through & come out](#) / B. Andrees, 2008.

⁷ [Ibid.](#) pp 93–99.

⁸ See e.g. the information on the "[Operation Golf](#)" whereby a joint investigation team was set up by Europol and Romanian and UK police forces.

⁹ [Breaking the Silence: Trafficking in Romani Communities](#) / 2011, p.12. See also [Trafficking in persons for begging – Romania study](#), p. 64.

¹⁰ [The Impact of Trafficking on Children: Psychological and Social Policy Perspectives](#) / Y. Rafferty, pp 14-15.

Disclaimer and Copyright

This briefing is a summary of published information and does not necessarily represent the views of the author or the European Parliament. The document is exclusively addressed to the Members and staff of the European Parliament for their parliamentary work. Links to information sources within this document may be inaccessible from locations outside the European Parliament network. © European Union, 2014. All rights reserved.

Photo credits: © Arpad Nagy-Bagoly / Fotolia.

<http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu>

<http://epthinktank.eu>

epres@ep.europa.eu