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SITUATION REPORT

CRIMINAL NETWORKS INVOLVED IN THE TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION OF UNDERAGE VICTIMS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

This Europol product is descriptive and oriented towards explaining the current crime situation providing an overview of all relevant factors (OCGs, criminal markets, and geographical dimension).

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Foreword of the Director

Catherine De Bolle, Executive Director Europol: 'exploited children in vulnerable situations deserve to be protected more than anyone else.'

I am delighted to present Europol's Situation Report on Criminal Networks Involved in the Trafficking and Exploitation of Underage Victims in the European Union (EU). For the first time at EU level, the features of criminal networks involved in one of the most ominous crimes of all have been analysed and clearly described.

This report stems from a wish expressed by the EU Member States in the framework of the current EU Policy Cycle for the fight against serious and organised crime, which outlines ad hoc strategies and operational actions aimed at disrupting the most threatening international criminal groups active on EU soil and across countries.

This report makes use of the great investigative work done by devoted national anti-trafficking units in the various Member States, which believe that international cooperation is key to the success of tackling cross border crime. With the support of Europol's dedicated office working to combat the trafficking of human beings (THB), Analysis Project Phoenix, European Union bodies and associated third countries and international organisations, these Member State experts do their best to prevent and combat all forms of criminality associated with THB.

Through months and years of investigation and exchanging information, important intelligence concerning these heinous criminals could be gathered and analysed in-house. We were able to draw an up-to-date picture of the most perpetrated forms of child trafficking affecting the EU. This then created evidence-based intelligence and increased the understanding of criminals' profiles and their modus operandi to support future investigative actions at both

national and EU level.

For this purpose, operational intelligence from almost 600 contributions was used, on cases involving trafficked underage victims, both EU and non-EU nationals, which were reported to Europol by the Member States between 2015 and 2017.

Vulnerable boys and girls, between the age of two and seventeen years old, are targeted by traffickers for different purposes: to be sexually abused in prostitution; to be put on the street and beg for money, pickpocket or steal from shops; or to work for no pay in restaurants, farms, factories, shops, often living in the place of exploitation.

Criminals decide to target children for many reasons. Children are easier to control, can be easily manipulated both physically and psychologically and do not know how to react to or escape from exploitative situations. Furthermore, minors are more profitable than adult victims: they have (or express) fewer needs and, for example in prostitution, clients are prone to pay more for an encounter with a minor than with an adult. Lastly, children do not decide for themselves: traffickers very often directly engage their families in the recruitment process or even just target orphans.

Notwithstanding the amount of intelligence analysed and the actions taken by the Member States and Europol to combat this crime, we should continue to pay extra attention to the phenomenon of child trafficking, for male victims and migrating children in particular. Only if all competent authorities work closely together can we effectively protect these minors, as exploited children in vulnerable situations deserve to be protected more than anyone else.

Catherine De Bolle
Director of Europol

Background

This report is produced in the framework of the EU Policy Cycle for organised and serious international crime. The Justice and Home Affairs Council defined its priorities for 2018-2021 based on Europol's Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA), released in March 2017.

Each priority has been developed through multi-annual strategic plans (MASPs) setting specific goals for each threat. In order to achieve these goals, annual Operational Action Plans (OAPs) are designed and implemented in the framework of EMPACT (European multidisciplinary platform against criminal threats) which coordinates actions implemented by EU Member States, participating non-EU countries and European Union (EU) institutions against the identified priorities.

Trafficking in human beings (THB) is one of the identified crime priorities of the current EU Policy Cycle 2018-2021.

The aim is to disrupt organised crime groups (OCGs) involved in intra-EU human trafficking and human trafficking from the most prevalent external source countries for the purposes of labour exploitation and sexual exploitation, including those groups using legal business structures to facilitate or disguise their criminal activities.

CRIMINAL NETWORKS INVOLVED IN THE TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION¹ OF UNDERAGE VICTIMS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Key findings

Child trafficking in the EU

- ◇ Trafficking and exploitation of male minors (especially for sexual exploitation) still remains an under-reported phenomenon at EU level.
- ◇ Traffickers active in the EU target underage victims mainly for sexual exploitation but also labour exploitation, to beg and to commit criminal acts, such as pickpocketing and shoplifting. Children are also trafficked for illegal adoption and sham marriages.
- ◇ Children are trafficked from around the world to the EU. The majority of non-EU networks reported to Europol involved Nigerian OCGs which traffic female minors and women to be sexually exploited. The OCGs are spread along the entire trafficking route and operate in several EU Member States.
- ◇ The majority of EU trafficking networks for child sexual exploitation reported to Europol are small in size (usually fewer than five key suspects) and active in one country at a time.
- ◇ Particularly harmful EU networks are large family clans which mainly traffic children for the purpose of begging, forced criminality and sexual exploitation. These clans operate in several countries at the same time and rotate victims on a regular basis.
- ◇ Children in migration and unaccompanied minors are at higher risk of trafficking and exploitation. Although the scale of trafficking of unaccompanied minors remains unknown, a future increase is expected.

Features of criminal networks

- ◇ Trafficking networks are mainly composed of members sharing the same nationality or ethnic ties. They mostly target victims of the same nationality.
- ◇ Female suspects play a key role in the trafficking and exploitation of minors, much more than in criminal networks which traffic adult victims.
- ◇ When the victims of trafficking are young girls, the younger traffickers are mainly male and applying the lover boy² method.
- ◇ Most EU traffickers have a criminal background in their country of origin or in other EU Member States, mainly in relation to property crimes, drug trafficking or fraud.

Modus operandi

- ◇ Traffickers regularly engage victims' families in the recruitment process or target children hosted in facilities such as orphanages and foster homes.
- ◇ Non-EU trafficked children are transported into Europe via air or sea, frequently with the involvement of smuggling networks. Transport within EU territory occurs mainly on land, using private vehicles or public transport.
- ◇ In some EU Member States, traffickers exploit minor victims in legal businesses such as brothels, red light districts, sex clubs, etc.
- ◇ The online advertisement of sexual services is an increasing phenomenon relating to THB for sexual exploitation, with children being advertised as adults.
- ◇ Document fraud is an essential component in the trafficking of minors. Traffickers often seize victims' documents and provide them with fake identities to conceal their real age.
- ◇ Criminal profits are mainly redirected to the country of origin of the key suspects in small amounts via money transfer services and in larger sums using criminal money couriers and mules.

¹ The definition of the "worst forms of child labour" is included in International Labour Organization Convention No 182. It includes (a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale or trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, or forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; (b) the use, procuring, or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography, or for pornographic purposes; (c) the use, procuring, or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs; and (d) work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children.

² The so-called lover boy method entails the recruitment of a victim by establishing a fake romantic relationship between one of the members of the criminal network and a targeted potential victim of trafficking. Once the victim has fallen in love, the deception/involvement of the victim into criminal activity is much easier.

Introduction

Child trafficking is one of the most heinous crimes and a crime against human rights as criminals profit from the abuse of the weakest social category of all – vulnerable children. Globally, approximately 28% of identified victims of trafficking are children³. In the EU, the trafficking and exploitation of underage victims occurs both at national level and across multiple Member States.

Criminal networks engaged in child trafficking in Europe comprise EU and non-EU criminals, targeting children suffering domestic, social and economic difficulties, children in migration as well as abandoned children. The members of these criminal networks are spread across multiple countries to organise the abuse of their minor victims and profit from their exploitation. Trafficking minors for sexual exploitation is very profitable, as criminals are aware that clients are ready to pay more for sexual encounters with minors than with adults.

One of the most serious aspects of this phenomenon is the role of the family. Europol receives regular intelligence contributions which detail children who are sold to criminal networks by their

parents, as criminals take advantage of families' poverty. In other cases parents themselves are engaged in trafficking and exploiting their own children.

Most of the cases reported to Europol involve networks escorting their minor victims across the entire route, from recruitment in their country of origin to the place of exploitation. Cases of the recruitment of unaccompanied minors in migration remain under-reported.

The very low number of cases reported to Europol on trafficking and exploitation of unaccompanied migrant children is most unlikely to reflect the true extent of the phenomenon.

Traffickers abuse the innocence of children to manipulate their sense of right and wrong. Their identities are often stolen and used by abusers for criminal purposes (mainly benefit fraud). Victims are often indoctrinated and are subjected to severe levels of psychological and physical trauma, without having the means to understand what is happening and why. This negatively affects their behaviour as children and will often have an adverse impact in their future adult life.

³ UNICEF and the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking (ICAT), Children account for nearly one-third of identified trafficking victims globally, 2018, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/children-account-nearly-one-third-identified-trafficking-victims-globally>.

1. Europol's fight against child trafficking (2015-2017)

Analysis Project (AP) Phoenix is Europol's operational project dealing with THB within the European Serious Organised Crime Centre. AP Phoenix is specifically mandated to support competent authorities of the Member States, as well as Union bodies and associated non-EU countries and international organisations in preventing or combating the forms of criminality within Europol's mandate associated with THB.

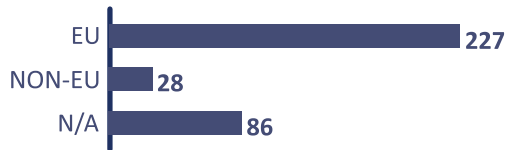
One of the key priorities of the AP is child trafficking. For operational purposes, the project is allowed to store and process data and criminal information on victims of THB and suspects.

The cases reported by EU Member States and cooperating non-EU countries and supported by AP Phoenix, involving exclusively or predominantly child victims, are very low in number. The majority of the cases concerning child trafficking have a mixed profile of adult and minor victims trafficked/exploited by the same criminal group or individual criminals. The figures presented below depict this situation:

Trafficking cases involving exclusively minor victims (Source: Europol data 2015-2017)

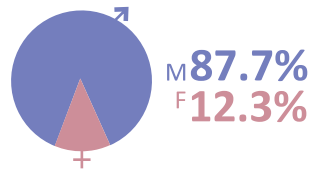
Cases
34

Suspects
341



Countries and states

Albania | Bosnia and Herzegovina | Bulgaria | Burundi | Czech Republic | Democratic Republic of Congo | Denmark | Ethiopia | The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia | France | Germany | Hungary | Italy | Morocco | Netherlands | Republic of Congo | Romania | Serbia | Slovakia | Slovenia | Somalia | Spain | Ukraine | United Kingdom

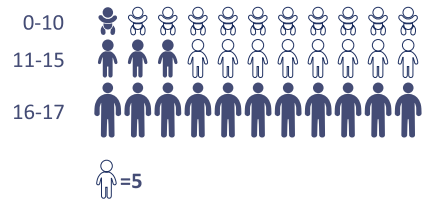
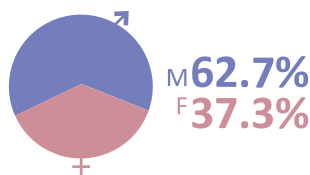


Victims identified
75



Countries and states

Bulgaria | Democratic Republic of Congo | Hungary | Italy | Nigeria | Republic of Congo | Romania | Serbia | Slovakia



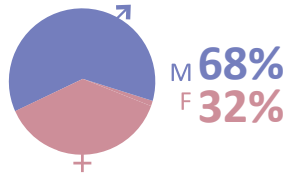
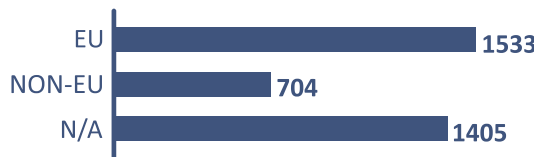
Trafficking cases where minor victim is involved (Source: Europol data 2015-2017)

Cases

268

Suspects

3642



Countries and states

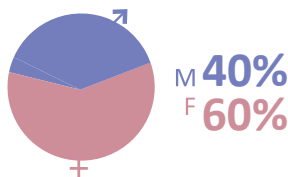
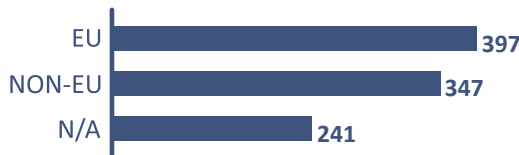
Afghanistan | Albania | Angola | Benin | Bosnia and Herzegovina | Cameroon | China | Côte d'Ivoire | Democratic Republic of Congo | Georgia | Ghana | Iraq | Kosovo* | Lebanon | Liberia | Mali | Moldova | Morocco | Nigeria | Oman | Pakistan | Republic of Congo | Serbia | Switzerland | Syria | Tunisia | Turkey | Vietnam



Austria | Belgium | Bulgaria | Croatia | Czech Republic | France | Germany | Hungary | Ireland | Italy | Latvia | Lithuania | Netherlands | Poland | Portugal | Romania | Slovakia | Slovenia | Spain | United Kingdom

Victims identified

985

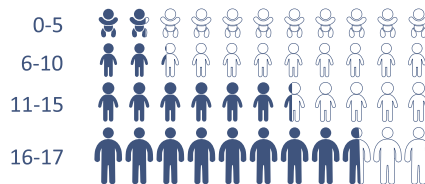


Countries and states

Afghanistan | Albania | Angola | Benin | Bosnia and Herzegovina | Chad | China | Côte d'Ivoire | Democratic Republic of Congo | Eritrea | Ghana | Guinea | Iraq | Kenya | Kosovo* | Mali | Moldova | Morocco | Nigeria | Oman | Republic of Congo | Russia | Serbia | Somalia | Switzerland | Syria | Vietnam | Sierra Leone | Sudan



Bulgaria | Croatia | Czech Republic | France | Germany | Hungary | Ireland | Italy | Latvia | Lithuania | Netherlands | Poland | Romania | Slovakia | United Kingdom



1 icon = 50

*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/99 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

2. Non-EU networks trafficking non-EU child victims, including children in migration

2.1 Nigerian networks

Nigerian organised crime is a great challenge for EU law enforcement. Besides trafficking in human beings, Nigerian networks are known to be active in other criminal businesses in the EU: those linked to THB such as corruption, migrant smuggling, counterfeiting of documents and money laundering, are also involved in the trafficking and distribution of various types of drugs and currency counterfeiting.

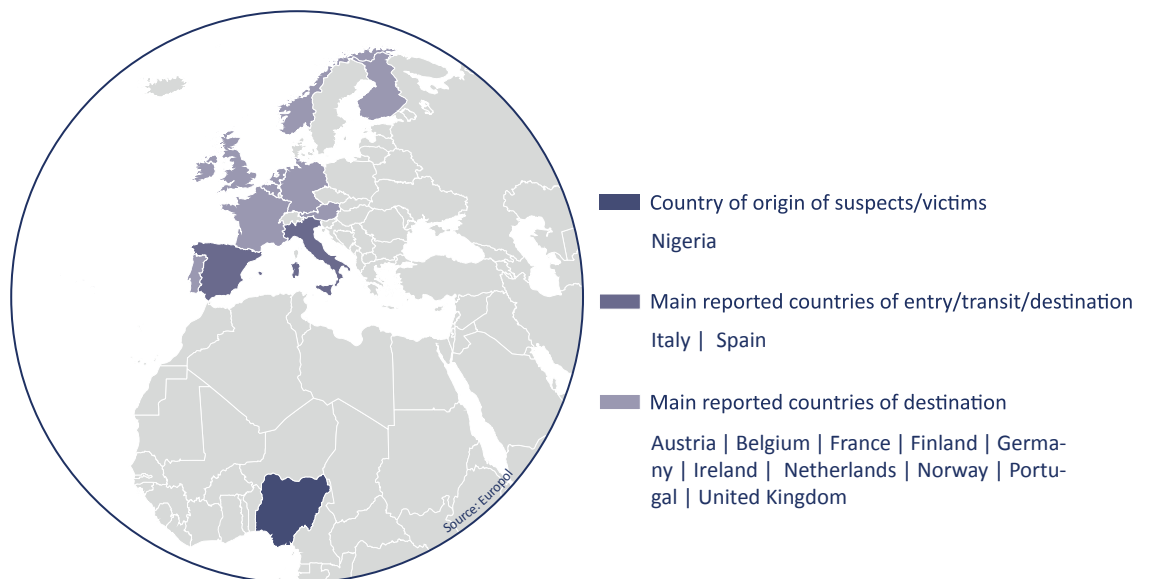
Geographical dimension

Southern EU Member States, such as Italy and Spain, are the main entry points for trafficked Nigerians who are then forced into prostitution in these countries and in Austria, Belgium, France, Finland, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and the United Kingdom.

Nigerian groups are well-organised both geographically and logistically and are able to mobilise a large number of human resources. One of their main strengths is their distribution in hubs along the trafficking route, from Nigeria to transit and destination countries, and the support of personal contacts carrying out various activities linked to the trafficking business.

The long established presence of Nigerian OCGs in the EU has given them an insight into law enforcement methods and a good understanding of how to misuse legal immigration channels (in particular the asylum mechanism, which they abuse both to traffic their victims and to legalise their status). This is shown by the many THB suspects who either hold legal residence permits, are currently asylum applicants, or former asylum seekers.

Figure 1. Map of Nigerian THB from Nigeria to EU



The structure of the criminal network

The typical Nigerian criminal group is not hierarchically structured but rather organised into cells, among which female suspects usually execute the core business (recruitment and exploitation), with male members having supportive roles. In fact, the role of female suspects within the criminal group is another specificity of Nigerian THB. Contrary to other criminal groups involved in human trafficking, where female members are generally employed as victim controllers, the figure of the ‘madam’, including acting as a ring leader, is central for the Nigerian THB business.

Sometimes female suspects themselves are former victims of trafficking who joined the criminal organisation and organise the recruitment and trafficking of other females in order to repay their own debt more quickly. Female associates often work as scouts in Nigeria; acting as exploiters in EU cities and travelling back to Nigeria to recruit new victims. Female exploiters also act as victim mentors and as guardians against men, while indoctrinating them and making sure those victims pay off their debt through prostitution.

The organisation is divided into cells composed of a few members per cell, each of whom plays a defined role.

The cellular structure makes it very easy for the organisation to move victims from one place to another and from one country the next. This, combined with the physical and psychological pressure exerted on the victims and their families, helps to avoid law enforcement attention.

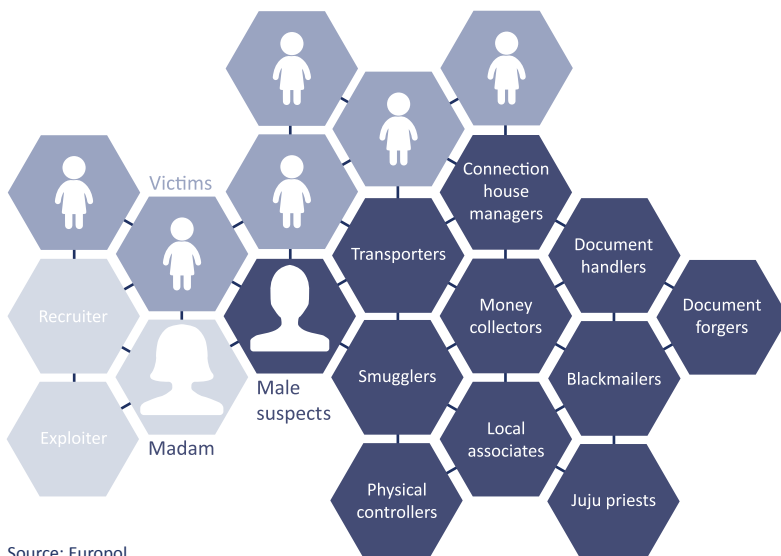
The large number of human resources and the structure in cells makes the organised crime network rather fluid. Once one cell is dismantled by law enforcement, the rest can continue to operate and can easily re-establish any losses.

Modus operandi

Recruitment

Among the cases supported by Europol, most of the child victims targeted by Nigerian OCGs are aged between 15 and 17 years old⁴. It is there that the first contact with the victim is made and trust is built, leading to economic and logistical arrangements being made between the network and the victim.

Figure 2. Key roles of Nigeria THB network



Source: Europol

Trafficking networks tend to target vulnerable minors coming from areas suffering from armed conflicts; in some cases they are orphans with no family. Recruiters are also aware of the economic deprivation of some areas of the country, the limited awareness of the consequences of human trafficking, the generally low-level of schooling and the adverse personal conditions of their potential victims.

The first encounter between the criminal organisation and a new victim often sees a female OCG member approaching girls in public spaces or through acquaintances. Traffickers can appeal to young girls with the promise of a well-paid job abroad (sometimes in Libya with an opportunity to then reach the EU), as hairdressers, shop workers, babysitters, waitresses or similar roles.

When minor victims do have family, recruiters often try to involve their relatives and persuade them that if the girl travels abroad they will make enough money to support the family. This implants a sense of responsibility in the victims towards their loved ones (who sometimes endorse their journey by advancing fees). As in the majority of cases of trafficking of minor victims, in Nigeria the family plays a central role in the trafficking process. Families have even been reported as encouraging the girls to approach someone keen to sponsor their journey to the EU.

In other cases recruiters lure the young victims with the offer of a 'free' trip to the EU, promising that all costs will be covered with the additional possibility of a reward when they arrive in Europe. Nigerian criminals take advantage of community superstitions and organise, with the support of local associates, voodoo rituals (called also 'juju'), during which alleged witches cast curses on the newly recruited victim. These rituals are a technique to emotionally consolidate the recruiter-victim relationship, obtain assurance that the girl will honour the payment for her transport and work arrangements, and ensure her total compliance with all

members of the network⁵.

Transportation

Sometimes the recruiter accompanies the victim along the whole route from Nigeria to Europe. For the transportation of victims, Nigerian networks make use of established logistical structures and cooperate with local smuggling groups active in key countries such as Libya.

During the journey, victims are passed from trafficker to trafficker and are frequently subjected to physical assaults by the armed groups controlling the transit territories, other migrants and criminals. They are often imprisoned in Libya, where some of them start being sexually exploited under the control of their madams. Once the sea smuggling transport is organised, improvised embarkations are prepared and fees are paid to smugglers to send victims to Italy via boat.

In some reported cases, Nigerian victims were approached by traffickers on arrival in Italy. The traffickers initially posed as friends and offered their support, from housing to travel arrangements and documents, while instead they were orchestrating their exploitation. Cases of repeated physical and psychological abuse have been reported.

Abuse of legal channels

To legalise their stay in the EU, the abuse of asylum procedures is a common *modus operandi* for Nigerian networks. Most of the time, minor victims are trafficked undocumented and are advised by their recruiters to apply for international protection by lying about their age, their personal story and by stating that they are unaccompanied (even when the trafficker travels with them). If the lie about their age is believed, they are placed in shelters for adult asylum seekers, from where their extraction is easily organised.

Exploitation

Victims are specifically instructed by their recruiters to contact particular telephone numbers (i.e. the Nigerian cell that operates in Italy or Spain) after they have been placed in the refugee shelter, as these OCG members will take care of their extraction and further transportation. Often victims are also physically assaulted by these criminals. After weeks or months of violence, the minors are eventually put under the supervision of a madam, who forces them into the prostitution business to start generating the money to repay their debt. The smuggling costs added up with daily expenses, are used by the criminal group to give a debt of between EUR 30 000 and EUR 60 000 for each victim.

To avoid law enforcement attention, traffickers often exploit underage victims in more clandestine situations than adult victims, for example in illegal brothels and private apartments, or by avoiding placing them on the street during the day time.

Use of fraudulent documents

Nigerian networks have the capability to forge documents in support of THB activities. Fraudulent documents are used to hide the real age and identity of victims. Forged documents are used to transport minor victims across the EU, usually by car with members of the organisation.

In a few cases, minor victims were provided with forged documents and transported by plane from Nigeria to an EU transit country, escorted by members of the organisation. In one case, the madam and a male associate were posing as relatives of the victim, while in another case the victim was urged to act as if she were the partner of the male trafficker. Sometimes victims and traffickers hold fraudulent tourist visas obtained from EU consulates in Nigeria. Cases where minor victims were transported via plane across the EU have also been reported.

Countermeasures against law enforcement

Apart from the significant use of forged documents and aliases by both suspects and victims, the network members also regularly change SIM cards purchased in different countries and use numerous phone operators. Other common means of countering police investigations are traditional religious threats to scare victims and their families in order to instil general fear and reticence against reporting the criminal activity.

Criminal financing

Nigerian networks generate extremely high criminal profits, as each victim is forced to pay back the organisation usually between EUR 30 000 and EUR 60 000, including additional costs for housing and daily living are added to this debt. Paying off the debt can last several years.

The illicit proceeds of prostitution are often transferred in small sums via money transfer services and/or couriers (women are often used and cash is usually concealed or swallowed), among the cells across the EU. Once caught, couriers often claim that the money is intended for business purposes such as buying vehicles or merchandise⁶.

Nigerian couriers often hold EU residence permits and in some cases use lookalike documents of individuals with a residence permit, which is then later returned to the original owners in postal parcels (impostor couriers). Money is eventually sent back to Nigeria: directly into national bank accounts, through the use of local associates and hawala schemes. Once the trafficking of a new victim is planned, members in the EU receive money in advance, to cover future expenses.

2.2 Other African networks

Trafficking networks originating from other African countries have been reported to a lesser extent to Europol. Cases reported include criminals originating from Angola, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Somalia. Most of the reported criminal groups were spread across Africa and the EU, with associates located in the EU in charge of the exploitation of the minor victims. The victims were almost all female, usually sharing the same nationality or ethnic ties with their traffickers and most often being exploited as prostitutes. In one case the victim was trafficked for domestic servitude in a private apartment.

Structure and features of criminal networks

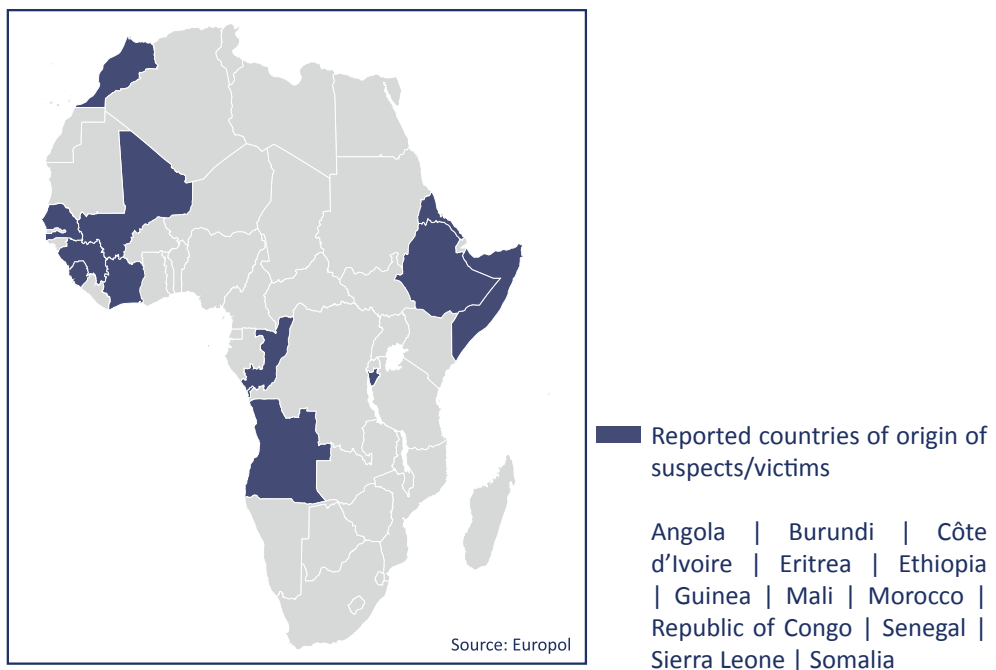
The size of the investigated networks varied quite considerably, from small groups made of two or three suspects, both male and female, to larger groups,

composed of six to ten members. Some groups had more than 20 associates and usually the larger the group the more victims they controlled. Female suspects were often involved, posing as parents or guardians during the journey of the minor victims from Africa to the EU and working as madams, the same *modus operandi* as their Nigerian counterparts.

Cases that were reported concerned criminal networks that are generally less sophisticated and less geographically expanded than the Nigerian groups. Unlike Nigerian networks, in which members all tend to share the same nationality, other African networks are often comprise members of different nationalities, often originating from the same African region or sharing historical and linguistic links (Angolans working with Guineans, Burundi nationals working with Ethiopians and Somalis).

Some of the criminals reported as

Figure 3. Map of reported countries of origin of suspects and victims



being involved in the trafficking held EU nationality (with African origins) or had dual nationality. Within the groups, African members were more involved in the targeting and recruitment of victims, as well as escorting them into the EU. EU-based associates often arrange to bypass legal channels and immigration paperwork of the victims, or were involved in the transportation and exploitation of the victims across the EU.

Those African networks involved in trafficking underage victims for sexual exploitation were reported as also involved in other criminal activities (migrant smuggling, money laundering, trafficking of drugs, trafficking of forged banknotes, corruption and document fraud).

Modus operandi

An aspect of cases involving African networks trafficking underage victims which causes most concern is the very young age of the girls, who ranged mainly between 7 and 16 years old, with many being under 10 years old.

Recruitment

The most fortunate victims were identified and safeguarded upon their arrival in the EU, usually on entry, at airports. Especially when victims were very young (under 10 years old), they are always accompanied by associates of the criminal group, who often pose as their parents or legal guardians. The reported cases often involved the active participation of the closest relatives of the victims (mothers and/or fathers), who were found to be in direct contact with the traffickers/exploiters.

Victims were commonly targeted in their country of origin, where arrangements for further transportation were made. In one case concerning a large pool of victims, mainly from Morocco and ranging between 11 and 16 years old, were firstly encouraged to participate on the party scene in their country of origin, and subsequently were forced

into prostitution abroad in private parties and apartments. In this case, the criminal group specifically targeted virgins, as they were paid much more by customers.

Criminal groups mostly use air connections between African countries and EU Members States to facilitate the entry of these minor victims. As an example, several underage Angolan potential victims of trafficking were identified while trying to enter the EU via Lisbon and Porto international airports, unaccompanied or escorted by other Angolan citizens who, claiming to be their direct relatives, were using forged or lookalike Angolan documents – passports, ID cards, birth certificates and travel documents.

The number of minors detected at Portuguese airports is steadily increasing since 2014, with more than 20 entries per year following the same scheme. For Angolan victims, Portugal is used as a point of entry to the EU while the end destination of the minors is in other EU Member States, especially Belgium, France, Germany and the United Kingdom. Associates of the THB network maintain a logistical base in the country to facilitate the initial stages of the exploitation process: housing the victims and organising their further movements. The form of exploitation linked to the trafficking of the Angolan victims still remains an intelligence gap.

Exploitation

In most reported cases, victims were exploited in illegal prostitution circles. Only in one case the victims were advertised online on websites offering sexual services, with their accounts being managed by the suspects.

Use of fraudulent documents

Document fraud is another common crime committed and is used to facilitate the transport of the minor victims into the EU; traffickers often make use of lookalike passports (using passports of minors of African nationality who hold

valid EU residence permits).

Sometimes traffickers fraudulently obtain identity and travel documents and short duration (tourist) Schengen visas for their victims, with which it is easier to travel within the EU.

2.3 Vietnamese OCGs

Europol has provided support in cases of children trafficked by Asian groups and exploited in the EU. Most of the information concerned cases of Vietnamese children exploited for labour purposes. However, there were also investigations on domestic servitude, sexual exploitation, forced criminality and forced begging.

The majority of victims were identified in France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. These countries are used by traffickers as both transit and destination countries for child victims. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of the trafficking of minors from Vietnam to Europe is likely to concern many more countries, as the wider offence of smuggling of Vietnamese nationals has been ongoing for several years and is reported by numerous EU Member States.

Structure and features of criminal networks

Vietnamese trafficking networks are spread across continents in origin, transit and destination countries. They are divided into operative cells that handle victims one at a time. Such a geographical span blurs the criminal structure, can hinder law enforcement investigations, and limits the chances of distinguishing between core criminals and facilitators.

Little is known about the profile of the criminal actors organising this trafficking, as once in Europe, when identified by police, minor victims are often unaccompanied. They report that anonymous facilitators accompanied them for some of the legs of their

journey from Vietnam to the EU and sometimes they were boarded on means of transports and were travelling alone.

It is not clear whether the criminals located in the EU are part of the trafficking network. They may be the same criminal networks who arrange the illegal facilitation of these minors, or cooperating groups, that control of the exploitation of the victims in Europe, forcing them to take part in illegal activities (victims have been found locked inside illegal cannabis factories and involved in drugs trafficking). Most of the other victims are found to have been found exploited in nail salons and in illegal prostitution circles.

Where possible, Vietnamese traffickers make use of their own national contacts for the facilitation of victims into the EU; they do not usually tend to outsource such services to other local criminal organisations⁷ (although some examples of exceptions are provided below).

Identified suspects were generally middle-aged, both male and female, reported to be involved in various stages of the THB process such as the recruitment of victims, the organisation of the departure from Vietnam, the procurement of fraudulent documents (usually forged EU passports), transport via land (usually from Russia and entering the EU via eastern border territory, via the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine), and their accommodation in safe houses. Vietnamese citizens in Poland have been known to provide logistical support to smuggled migrants, accommodating them in safe-houses and restaurants). In most cases, Vietnamese suspects living in the EU held residence permits and were involved in legal business structures and administration structures where the exploitation eventually occurred.

Russian citizens of Chechen origin were sometimes reported to be involved in the facilitation of Vietnamese victims

when the facilitation was overland through Russia. EU nationals were also occasionally reportedly involved in the last phases of the facilitation over the EU territory. However the EU facilitators had no prominent roles in the trafficking process, but were acting in support of Vietnamese suspects as drivers or providing accommodation.

Modus operandi

Recruitment

Recruiters located in Vietnam target potential victims in the country. They often look for orphans and minors suffering from economic or social distress or political persecution, with low levels of education and limited prospects. The first encounter between recruiter and victim is generally stated as occurring through family and/or friends; however the internet and social media increasingly play a role in the recruitment phase. Children and their families – if they have one – are promised a better life abroad by encouraged to take a migratory journey in order to find a job in China or Europe.

Abuse of legal channels

In most of the cases reported, minor victims travelled unaccompanied and were most likely instructed by the traffickers on how to act and what to say in case of identification. Sometimes they were travelling in small groups, and in most cases they did not hold any identity or travel documents when identified by EU law enforcement.

Some of the victims were identified in EU international airports upon arrival; traffickers had perhaps boarded them on flights from Vietnam (usually Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City) with Russia as a final destination but transiting in Europe. Instead of boarding the second flight to Russia, they were instructed to contact the authorities at the transit airport and apply for asylum, usually stating they were politically persecuted by the Vietnamese government or that they were orphans of foreign adoptive

parents who had died (some children have been found in possession of notes with makeshift plots).

Once placed in ad hoc shelters for asylum applicants most of the children quickly disappeared, leaving no trace. The risk of them having been transferred to unknown destinations in the EU for exploitation is very high and there are additional concerns because of their age and the fact they rarely speak a European language.

In some cases victims were transported through the Eurotunnel to the UK, then were abandoned on the streets of British cities, potentially as traffickers had only hired lorry drivers to drive through the tunnel.

OCG countermeasures against law enforcement

One of the most difficult features of Vietnamese trafficking is that victims were very rarely able or willing to identify their traffickers, perhaps as the victims perceive them more as mere smugglers, failing to foresee the exploitative condition that they will encounter after their journey. In addition, there are significant concerns around the number of cases of victims vanishing after being rescued by law enforcement. In these cases the victims are highly likely to have been re-trafficked. In the Netherlands for instance, between 2014 and 2017, 25 Vietnamese children vanished after being identified as potential victims of trafficking by local police.

Some victims reported that they were accommodated in safe houses in deserted areas within the EU for months before they boarded a lorry and were transferred to their final destination. In temporary residences, victims reported to have been subjected to enslavement and forced to live in inhuman conditions, in confined spaces with dozens of other strangers.

Vietnamese victims usually tend to not cooperate with European authorities,

for fear of being accused of criminal activities, deportation or what may happen to their families (either revenge attacks by the traffickers or investigation into their families who often have a role in the trafficking process).

2.4 Trafficking of Afghan victims

Europol has received information about cases related to the potential trafficking of Afghan minors, who were identified travelling across the EU with unrelated adults.

One case occurred at the border area between Hungary and Serbia, where two Afghan siblings were discovered travelling together with a man with a non-EU passport. The man attempted to apply for asylum in Hungary posing as the children's legal guardian, claiming to have received instructions from their father, who was unable to travel with them.

2.5 Risks of trafficking and exploitation for unaccompanied migrant minors

The risks around the trafficking and exploitation for unaccompanied minors originating from countries affected by conflicts, economic and social distress, has recently increased. The widening of the EU migration crisis since 2015⁸ and the worsening of the social conditions especially in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Syria meant that thousands of minors travelled to the EU, often leaving behind their families and hoping for a better future. According to Eurostat, between 2015 and 2017, a total number of 189 845 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum in the EU⁹. The majority of these unaccompanied children were boys between 15 and 17 years old¹⁰.

Monitoring the conditions of unaccompanied minors within the migratory flows is a challenging task for authorities in the EU Member States, as well as for other international organisations working in the field of

migration and human rights. Europol, the European Commission, IOM, UNHCR and different NGOs including Missing Children Europe¹¹ try to collect comprehensive data on children in migration.

Coordination among the various stakeholders, backlogs in official records¹² and secondary movements of children after their asylum application make estimates extremely difficult. For example, the data communicated by EU Member States to Eurostat continues to be fragmented, especially breakdowns on age and sex. Furthermore, precise numbers of unaccompanied migrant minors (UAMs) who go missing or abscond from reception and care facilities are not known¹³.

Data on children who do not apply for asylum is even more fragmented, if it exists at all¹⁴. Apart from problems related to statistics, the implementation of international protection has presented several shortfalls and in some reception spaces in the EU children are vulnerable to criminal networks, abuse and exploitation¹⁵.

Links between migrant smuggling and THB

There is a clear indication of links between criminal networks operating migrant smuggling and those involved in human trafficking. Among the criminals known to Europol, 20% of those involved in facilitation of irregular migration are also reported to be active in THB¹⁶. There is evidence that many smuggling networks are poly-criminal and engage in other criminal activities (including document fraud, property crime, drug trafficking, excise fraud, and trafficking of counterfeit goods).

Furthermore, following the outbreak of the migration crisis in late 2015, some groups involved in THB, drugs trafficking and/or property crime have shifted their activity to migrant smuggling or added it to their criminal portfolio, attracted by higher demand for facilitation and the high profits. In this era of high migration

flows, migrants represent a large pool of vulnerable individuals susceptible to criminal exploitation, and among these, unaccompanied children are even easier prey.

Risks for children in migration

Increase in the prices of facilitation services also raises the risk of exploitation of migrants in countries of transit and destination as their debt increases. In 2016 Turkey reported that minors were being increasingly used to steer boats with migrants for the sea journey from Turkey to Greece – the reason was that minors could not be arrested and charged with smuggling¹⁷.

Victimisation of minors occurs also on the streets as well as inside reception centres of many EU Member States, as regular media reports detail, from entry to destination countries. Media have described foreign children being sexually exploited¹⁸ or forced to work¹⁹. Unaccompanied minors become victims of sexual abuse, become exploited for labour or may be forced to commit a range of criminal activities, including begging, drug trafficking and property crime.

Media and official sources report that among the flow of UAMs entering the EU, a number of them are likely to have gone missing following their arrival²⁰. The likely reasons for this are mistrust of institutional channels, fear of deportation, lengthy asylum processes and impatience with relocation processes (which are known to be quite long), but they also can indicate potential abduction and/or exploitation.

The current disaggregation of official databases coupled with backlogs in registration and asylum processes means the real number of missing UAMs can only be approximated²¹. In any case, according to a report issued in 2016 by Missing Children Europe²², in 2015 only 27.1 % of the missing unaccompanied migrant children were found by the authorities. This is further evidenced by the observation that up to

20% of UAMs disappear from reception centres within 24 hours of their placement, raising questions about the role of reception centres in providing a safe place space for these children²³.

2.6 South American trafficking networks

Europol has received information on South American OC networks trafficking minor victims from South America to the EU either for sexual or labour exploitation. One trafficking network comprising Brazilian nationals was recruiting male Brazilian teenagers in their home country, promising them exciting work opportunities in various European football clubs.

The children and their families were lured through advertisements posted online, in Brazilian newspapers and on social media platforms like Facebook. The traffickers managed to bring a number of minors into Europe. Once the boys joined the football teams²⁴, they were kept in conditions of captivity by the exploiters and were not paid, contrary to what was agreed with their families back home. It is probable that the criminals obtained regular work visas for their victims. One Brazilian girl (16 years old) was reported as trafficked to the EU with immigration papers that stated she was the wife of her trafficker (an EU national). Not only was the suspect twice her age, he also had criminal convictions for offences relating to sexual exploitation and facilitation of irregular migration.

Another case reported to Europol concerned a Colombian trafficking network targeting young boys in Colombia who were then trafficked to the United States, South America and the EU for sexual exploitation in clandestine prostitution circles. The victims were even forced to go under surgery in order to achieve a feminine appearance. Traffickers forced these victims to pay smuggling fees of EUR 3 000 per person, which were partially used by the network to purchase flight tickets and forged documents.

Three suspects from Colombia were identified: one acting as a key player and the other two coordinating the travel and documents arrangements for the victims.

2.7 Albanian-speaking networks

Europol has received information regarding several criminal groups composed of Albanian-speaking suspects trafficking minors into the EU, both boys and girls, for their labour and sexual exploitation, and also for illegal adoption. Some criminal networks were operating in several EU countries simultaneously, and some suspects were already recorded in EU criminal databases in connection with their involvement in property crime, drug production and trafficking, forced prostitution and migrant smuggling.

In most of these cases the victims' families were involved in the trafficking process to different extents, sometimes knowingly handing over their children, or sometimes being unaware of the risks of exploitation hidden behind a smuggling service.

In one case, an Albanian-speaking criminal group was smuggling young boys between 12 and 15 years old into the EU and subsequently forced them to work in car washes for no pay. Children were given away by their families in Albania and Kosovo²⁵, who paid a fee to the smugglers of around EUR 10 000, upon the promise that their child be given a better future in the EU. The minors were first transported illegally to southern Europe, and then were travelling via air and sea to western Europe. This criminal network had several cells located in various EU Member States, profiting from the preliminary payment of the families but also from the labour exploitation of the minors.

When networks worked systematically and in multiple countries, often certain cells were in charge of the planning and organisation of the smuggling phase (document forging was a common

component). In other cases, traffickers relied on established smuggling infrastructures to arrange the entry of their victims into the EU. Often, minor victims exploited in prostitution in the EU were moved out of their country of origin at the same time as other adult victims.

An Albanian-speaking group was reportedly planning the abduction of toddlers in order to arrange illegal adoptions. One of the particular concerns regarding this network was the geographical dimension of the group, since the suspects were found to be in contact with people in several EU countries, India and Vietnam organising potential illegal adoption schemes.

⁴ Save the Children (Young Invisible, Enslaved, 2017) <https://www.savethechildren.it/sites/default/files/files/rapporto%20young%20invisible%20enslaved%20DEF.pdf>) has noticed a threatening progressive transformation of the profile of children in 2016, when victims started arriving in Italy much younger, rarely schooled and increasingly poor, with a growing number of girls aged 13 to 14.

⁵ On 9 March 2018, Oba Ewuare II, the state ruler of the Edo state (the originating region of many victims of trafficking exploited into the EU) publicly nullified any oaths undertaken by victims of human trafficking and placed a curse on any native doctor or juju priest who carried out the practice. This pronouncement is considered a historical move and will likely have positive consequences, as more victims may request help from law enforcement authorities against their exploiters.

⁶ Occasionally, traffickers even fill in declarations without actually having the cash, to justify amounts of cash they would later bring out of Europe.

⁷ However for transporting victims from France to the UK, they may have local connections to identify available lorry drivers.

⁸ The term 'migration crisis' refers specifically to the period between September 2015 and 23 March 2016 (the day of the EU-Turkey leaders' meeting in Varna, Bulgaria).

⁹ Eurostat, Asylum applicants considered to be unaccompanied minors - annual data, 2018, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00194&plugin=1>.

¹⁰ Unicef, Latest statistics and graphics on refugee and migrant children, <https://www.unicef.org/eca/what-we-do/emergencies/latest-statistics-and-graphics-refugee-and-migrant-children>.

¹¹ Missing Children Europe has supported the development of a client relationship and data collection system that was rolled out across eight countries in Europe by 2017. This system allows for a coherent and systematic collection of comparable data that can then be used to research and better understand the problem and possible solutions to the issue of child disappearances. Missing Children Europe also collects data from the network of European hotlines for missing children operated in 29 countries in Europe. This data is collected annually and published via a data report that gives insight on the ages, reasons of going missing, number of children that are found, etc.

¹² In 2016 Caritas reported to have hosted 3 000 unaccompanied and separated children in transit in Ventimiglia, trying to cross the Italian border towards France.

¹³ European Commission, Commission staff working document: Implementation of the action plan on UAMs (2010-2014), 2017, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20170412_communication_on_the_protection_of_children_in_migration_annex_en.pdf.

¹⁴ 10th European Forum on the rights of the child, November 2016

¹⁵ Media recently reported on 104 out of the 167 UAMs known to have crossed from northern France into the UK since in August 2016 are still unaccounted by the British authorities and may have fallen into the hands of human exploiters (Independent, More than 100 child refugees missing in UK after being smuggled from Calais, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/child-refugees-uk-missing-calais-smuggled-jungle-camp-crisis-lorries-parliament-dubs-resettlement-a7853991.html>). A more recent 2017 UNICEF study found that only 15% of those unaccompanied foreign minors who had worked in Italy had had a contract (InfoMigrants, Unaccompanied foreign minors at risk of irregular work, 2018, <http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/7853/unaccompanied-foreign-minors-at-risk-of-irregular-work>).

¹⁶ Europol information, 2017.

¹⁷ Europol information, 2016.

¹⁸ Corriere, Ad Atene, tra i giovani migranti costretti a prostituirsi per vivere, 2017, http://www.corriere.it/esteri/17-novembre_13/ad-atene-giovani-migranti-costretti-prostituirsi-vivere-0f0f5aa2-c8a1-11e7-83f4-5d7185c8c90c.shtml
Corriere, Underage Nigerian immigrants forced into prostitution, 2018, http://www.corriere.it/english/17-luglio_18/underage-nigerian-immigrants-forced-into-prostitution-bb66f43c-6b94-11e7-9094-d21d151198e9.shtml
Spiegel Online, Unaccompanied Migrant Boys in Greece Turn to Prostitution, 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/teen-migrants-trapped-in-greece-turn-to-prostitution-a-1148288.html>
La Stampa, Rifugiati, il dramma dei minori vittime della prostituzione, 2017, <http://www.lastampa.it/2017/06/21/vaticaninsider/ita/inchieste-e-interviste/rifugiati-il-dramma-dei-minori-vittime-della-prostituzione-FYNYwUZZYhnNqrfaO559Q0/pagina.html>.

¹⁹ Unicef, A child is a child, 2017, https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF_A_child_is_a_child_May_2017_EN.pdf. Corriere Salentino, Presunto giro di prostituzione e sfruttamento minori nel centro migranti di Otranto, pronta l'interrogazione a Minniti, 2017, <https://www.corrieresalentino.it/2017/11/presunto-giro-di-prostituzione-e-sfruttamento-minori-nel-centro-migranti-di-ottranto-pronta-linterrogazione-minniti/>
Deutsche Welle, Berlin security staff pushed young refugees into prostitution, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/berlin-security-staff-pushed-young-refugees-into-prostitution/a-41098593>.

²⁰ Il Sole 24 Ore, La carica dei 18mila minori stranieri non accompagnati, 2018, https://www.ilssole24ore.com/art/notizie/2018-02-07/la-carica-18mila-minori-stranieri-non-accompagnati-164511.shtml?uuid=AEExS4vD&refresh_ce=1.

²¹ Europol does not collect its own data on missing persons/minors nor migrants; our sources are official national (ministries and agencies) and international bodies (IOM, UNHCR, Frontex, European Commission). Europol can link such data to criminal data in its own databases and interpret them in the light of its unique insight into the threat situation.

²² Missing Children Europe, Figures and Trends 2015: From hotlines for missing children and cross-border family me-

diators, 2015, <http://missingchildreneurope.eu/Portals/0/Docs/Annual%20and%20Data%20reports/Missing%20Children%20Europe%20figures%20and%20trends%202015.pdf>.

²³ Missing Children Europe, 'Missing unaccompanied migrant children', 2016, http://missingchildreneurope.eu/Portals/0/Docs/Briefing%20meeting%20Commission_Missing%20Children%20Europe.pdf.

²⁴ The clubs themselves were not aware of the exploitative conditions the boys were put in.

²⁵ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/99 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

3. Sham marriages organised by OCGs composed of mixed nationalities (EU and non-EU)

Criminal networks comprising EU and non-EU criminals have been reported to be involved in cases of trafficking of minors for the purpose of sham marriages. The recorded suspects originated from eastern and central Europe (Lithuania, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia) and in one case from Pakistan, and targeted mainly underage females from the same countries, some of whom were mothers of new-born babies. Recruitment was sometimes arranged between traffickers and the victims' families (there are even reports of victims being sold by their parents).

Links to migrant smuggling

Sham marriages are arranged to facilitate the legalisation of irregular migrants, mostly men, who usually already reside in the EU illegally. Through a sham marriage with an EU national, they become eligible to obtain an EU residence permit. The trafficking and abuse of female victims becomes, in these cases, part of the sham marriage facilitation service. In order to pretend that the couple is genuine, the victim has to spend a period of time cohabitating with the non-EU national, in order to pass potential immigration inspections during the first months after their declaration of marriage.

Offenders organising sham marriages are likely to be criminals involved in other migrant smuggling or facilitation activities. The reported organised crime groups were often composed of mixed nationalities including a non-EU national associate, working closely with the pool of "clients". Irregular migrants looking for a sham marriage are usually from the same country as the associate non-EU national.

The criminal networks targeted underage EU victims of marriageable age²⁶ and "sold" them for a period of time to interested irregular migrants; the young girls were generally unaware of the pre-arrangements and have been subjugated by means of psychological pressure and sexual and physical abuse by their exploiters.

Structure and features of criminal networks

Criminal networks involved in trafficking for sham marriages seem to be divided into two main categories: those who engage ad hoc in the business of sham marriages and identify a victim to exploit, and those who have expertise in facilitating illegal immigration (FII) and organise sham marriages in a more systematic way. EU family clans were sometimes found to be involved behind the more systematic cases, where the young female members of the family were the victims of exploitation.

Modus operandi

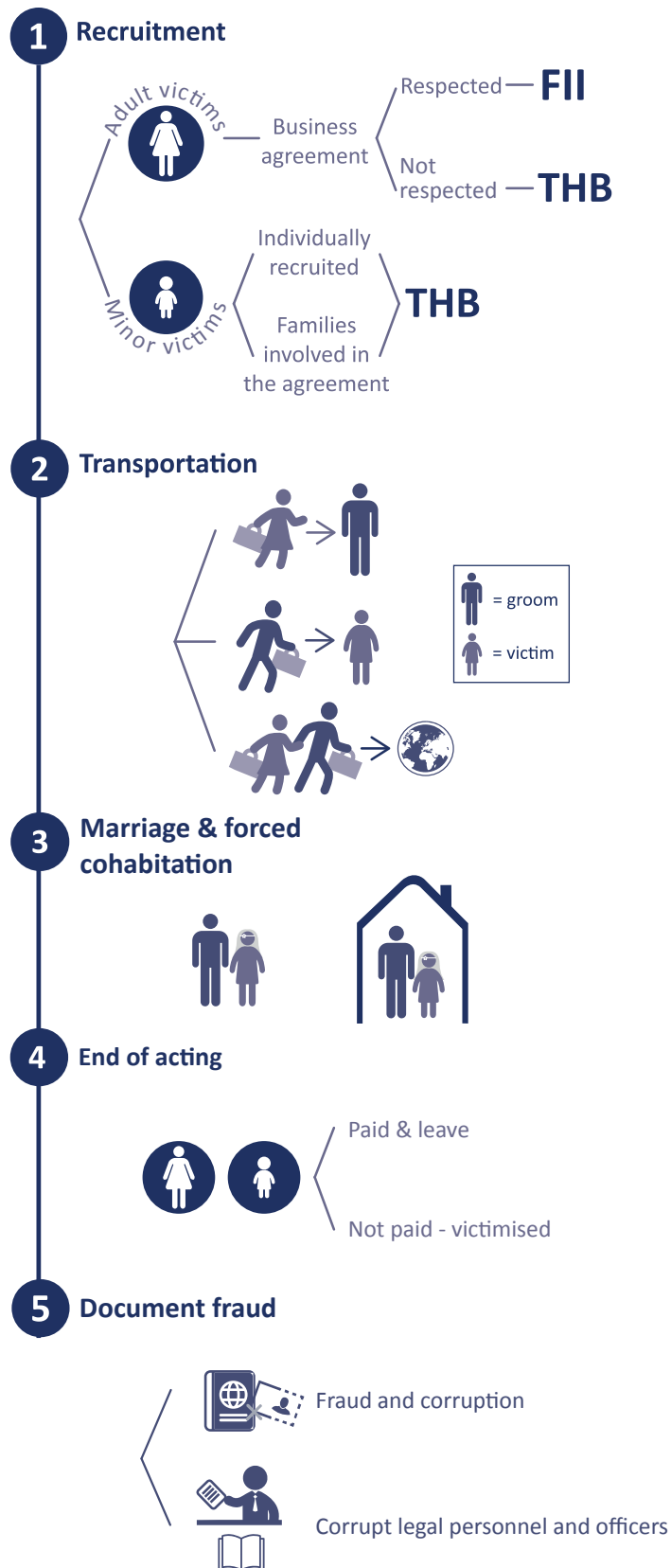
Recruitment

When targeting adult victims to conclude sham marriages, criminals generally offer them a business agreement for which part of the money paid by the non-EU national will be given to the victim. In many cases, women receive the agreed amount and the service terminates after a period of cohabitation with the groom. However, the agreement between the facilitators and the potential bride is sometimes only a façade. Payments are often not made, and women are psychologically and physically abused, both by their contractors and by their bogus grooms,

Figure 4. Conceptual model FII/THB sham marriages

FII = facilitation of irregular migration

THB = trafficking of human beings



especially during the period of forced cohabitation

In contrast, in cases involving minor victims, the majority of the minors were neither aware nor willing to participate in the sham marriage. In most of the cases, criminals targeted young girls originating from their own country and suffering from poor economic conditions, sometimes found through social networks and family contacts. When the victims' families are involved, traffickers often arranged to 'buy' the minor with a small payment. Of course, similarly to adults, minors are also at risk of psychological, sexual and physical abuse. In some cases, when the facilitation service was over and after the departure of the groom, criminals continued to abuse their victims and sexually exploited them into forced prostitution.

Transportation

In some cases, victims were recruited in their own country and transported to the country where the groom was already irregularly residing, while in other cases the groom travelled to the country of the victim or even to a non-EU country. The entire process would last a number of weeks, during which physical and psychological violence, rapes and captivity were commonly suffered by the young victims.

Use of expertise

Considerable fraudulent documentation and evidence needs to be produced to prove the existing relationship of the bogus couple when inspected by immigration officers (marriage certificate, photomontages of holidays, videos, housing and utilities contracts under the name of both parties, invoices for gym and TV contracts, etc.). For this purpose, corrupt legal advisors are involved and public servants are also corrupted to issue false certificates.

Criminal profits

A sham marriage can cost several tens of thousands of euros. The non-EU national repays the expenses borne by the traffickers for planning and organising the marriage, as well as all the other costs related to the recruitment of the bride, the staging of the marriage and the engagement of legal advisors. Ultimately, the criminal group charges the non-EU national much more than the actual costs of the all staging.

²⁶ In all EU Member States, the minimum age required for marriage coincides with the age of majority and is set at 18 years – with the exception of Scotland, where the age of marriage is 16 years, which is also the age of majority. In any case, most national legislation provides for the possibility to marry before reaching the age of majority with the consent of the parents and/or a judicial or administrative body

4. Intra-EU trafficking

4.1 OCGs trafficking EU minors for sexual exploitation

Europol has supported several cases of THB networks of EU nationals trafficking EU minors across borders and exploiting them into prostitution. Most of the reported victims were girls aged between 12 and 17 years old, exploited in some cases along with adult victims of trafficking, who were also young and usually not more than 20 years old. Few reported cases involved the trafficking and exploitation of boys, however the real scale of such phenomenon may be larger.

All victims were of EU nationality. Suspects and victims often shared the same nationality, sometimes coming from the same region and sharing ethnic ties. In a number of cases, traffickers and victims were related through family links.

Structure and features of the criminal networks

Most of the reported OCGs were composed of members sharing the same nationality, while in a few cases the groups were of mixed nationalities. Within the latter category, the nationality of criminals was usually divided between the origin country of victims and the country of exploitation. Those who originated from the same country as the victims were generally in charge of their recruitment and transportation across the EU, while the other associates (originating from or residing in the country of exploitation) were responsible for the housing and the direct exploitation of the minors.

In general, networks were small

(fewer than five key members) and were reported to be active only in one country, however most of them had been previously active in other EU Member States, relocating their business following police detection or in an attempt to avoid identification. The larger groups (more than five members) were usually active in multiple countries at the same time and were capable of managing a larger number of victims.

The groups were often composed of both male and female suspects, who in many cases were in a relationship. In other cases suspects were often members of the same family (siblings, parent and child, close relatives, etc.). Female associates were mainly employed in the recruitment of the victims and their direct exploitation (in some cases working as “senior” prostitutes for the group), and were also often responsible for the money movements among members and management of bank accounts.

Male OCG members were usually in charge of transportation, housing of victims (as owners or landlords), management of the place of exploitation (brothel, studio, club, etc.), and of victims’ physical control. The youngest male OCG members were often employed in the recruitment of victims, typically applying the lover boy method by pretending to establish a genuine romantic relationship with the young victim, to persuade her to relocate to another country while hiding his final exploitative purpose.

Within the reported groups, the rate of poly-criminality was also notable. Almost half of the OCGs were composed of members with criminal

records, either gained in their country of origin or in other EU Member States (in most cases they began a criminal career in their country of origin, had been sentenced and then, after serving their sentence, moved out of the country and perpetrated crimes elsewhere).

These suspects were mainly involved in crimes against property such as burglaries, serious thefts, fencing of stolen goods, several types of frauds (including payment card fraud), drug trafficking, illegal possession and trafficking of weapons, and money laundering. Some suspects had previously been involved in human exploitation in their country of origin. Some groups also committed other types of crimes along with THB, including migrant smuggling, document fraud, drug trafficking, and money laundering.

Modus operandi

Recruitment

As in most child trafficking cases, the family of the victims played a role in the recruitment process. Traffickers target families living in particularly degraded social and economic conditions. Families trade their children in return for a sum of money or to pay off an earlier debt. In many cases, parents liaised with the criminals to organise the documentation needed for their child's journey (guardianship statement, passport, etc.).

Traffickers also target minors without family such as homeless children, those in juvenile foster care, and in orphanages, from where they are encouraged to escape with them. When minors were recruited without the involvement of their family, suspects usually lured them with offers of a fresh new start abroad and a well-paid job.

As soon as the victims are transferred to the place of exploitation and the real purpose of their journey is clear, the traffickers seize all their belongings, mobile phones and documents to make

the victims utterly dependent on them.

Exploitation

Online advertisement of sexual services is reported as an increasing phenomenon in child trafficking for sexual exploitation. Suspects in many instances create the online profile of the victims on specific websites and manage accounts and prostitution services, while other times victims are convinced to do it by themselves, provided with forged documents to register as adult users. Suspects often force victims to produce sexually explicit photographs to be posted online and to take part to video-chat meetings with clients.

Most of the victims are kept under strict physical control; some are not allowed outside alone, are beaten and segregated in apartments where they usually live with the exploiters. Sometimes the sexual exploitation is organised on the same premises, alternatively in other rented apartments as well as in brothels managed by the suspects, or by individuals working in association with the criminal group. Some of the victims were forced to commit crimes beside the sexual exploitation, such as begging, stealing money from (prostitution) clients and working as drug mules.

Expertise

Traffickers of minor victims operate in a more secretive manner compared to criminals exploiting adults and apply additional strategies to counter police controls. Boys have been reported to be exploited in even more clandestine locations than female child victims. In one case suspects would transport the male victims to specific bars where sexual encounters with clients would be organised. In other cases, they would be forced to meet potential customers in parks and be sexually assaulted there.

Countermeasures against law enforcement

Victims revealed that they were given instructions on answers to be given to the police if they were detected, to hide their residential address, their real age, the name of other associates, their (lack of) income, etc. Suspects impose strict control on their victims to avoid police attention; physical violence, sexual assaults, provision of drugs and continuous threats are used to keep the victims in a permanent state of vulnerability. Traffickers also transfer their victims to other locations on a regular basis to increase their sense of displacement.

Document fraud

In most cases, travel and identity documents of the victims were seized by the traffickers after recruitment (often victims' parents handed them over to the traffickers). Following their arrival in the destination country, suspects provide victims with forged documents, to use during their prostitution activity, to disguise victims' ages and identity in case of police checks. Traffickers also use fraudulent IDs to conceal their own identity. In a few cases, forgers formed part of the trafficking group, while in other instances they most likely used other provider in a crime-as-a-service deal.

Use of legal business structures

The use of legal businesses to cover the exploitative activities is quite common for human traffickers. Suspects often buy, rent and make use of legal companies to cover their illicit activities and launder the profits. Among the cases reported, restaurants, hotels, cocktail bars, dance clubs, shops, car retailers, car washes, etc., were used to organise sexual encounters and for money laundering purposes.

Some of the reported groups systematically used complicit employment companies to obtain legitimate work contracts for their

victims. In countries where prostitution is legal, suspects were able to exploit minors alongside adults in window prostitution, sex studios, night clubs, etc., often with the support of the business managers.

Money flows and laundering of proceeds

Prostitution of minors can be very profitable for human traffickers, as clients are generally prone to pay more to have sex with a child. Usually victims have a daily financial threshold to reach through sexual services and sometimes suspects add extra fees to the threshold for the victims housing and subsistence. The cash profits are seized entirely by the direct supervisors and are in part reinvested to sustain the criminal business, while the rest is transferred back to the origin country of the suspects.

In most of the reported cases, the sums were sent in small amounts via money transfer services such as Western Union or Money Gram, while money couriers via land were mainly used for larger sums. In one case, also the use of hawala was reported. In the suspects' countries of origin, the funds are usually laundered by the ring leaders or their closest associates through legal business structures (restaurants) and real estate acquisitions, or were used to buy luxury items and to fund a luxurious lifestyle.

4.2 Family clans trafficking children for the purpose of forced criminality and begging

Family clans exploiting children in forced criminality and begging have been reported for many years by European authorities. Europol has received information on international investigations concerning family clans of EU nationality who exploit their own children, children of relatives, or children given away by their original families. The children were trafficked to commit several types of property crimes and/or

forced to beg and sometimes to ask for donations from bogus charities.

In some cases, boys and girls were being sexually exploited and some of the children's identities were used to fraudulently apply for social benefits. The majority of the victims, aged from a few months to 17 years old, were reported to have been exploited in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.

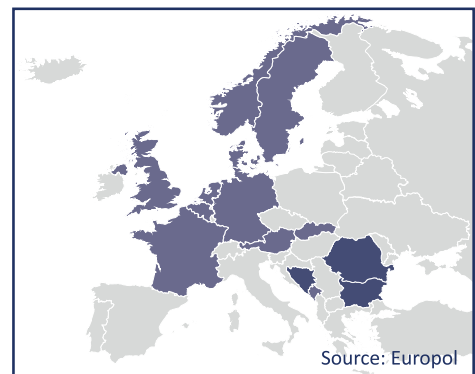
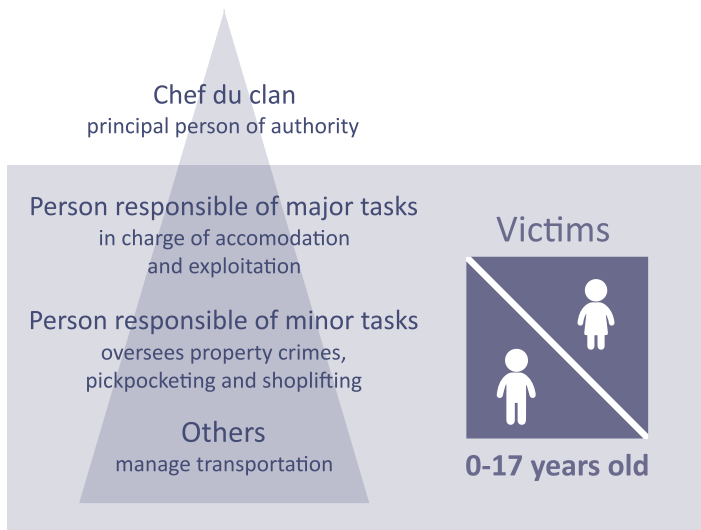
Structure of the criminal network and features

Family clans form close-knit criminal groups composed of interrelated families of three/four generations, are usually spread across multiple countries and can comprise several hundreds of members. The structure

of these criminal groups is not strictly vertical, but rather a kind of extended household led by the principal person of authority (known as a *chef du clan*). There are some major tasks that are the responsibility of certain clan members, based on age, gender and criminal experience. Some members of the group are in charge of accommodating the children and organising their exploitation.

Most of the reported cases involved family clans originating from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia. Although some families retain ties with their country of origin, with part of the clan still living there, younger generations often reside elsewhere and are even often born outside their families' country of origin. Members of the younger generations may hold a second EU nationality and/or residence permits.

Figure 5. Structure of family clan



- Main reported countries of origin**
 Bosnia and Herzegovina | Bulgaria | Romania | Slovakia
- Main reported countries of destination**
 Austria | Belgium | Denmark | France | Germany | Montenegro | Netherlands | Norway | Portugal | Slovakia | Spain | Sweden | United Kingdom

Victims are not necessarily accompanied by suspects when travelling or carrying out street crime, however some of the suspects serve as guides to minor and young victims, often cooperating or supervising them when the victims committing crimes. When victims are employed to pickpocket or shoplift, usually suspects take the proceeds from them immediately after the criminal act.

Young male members are more often involved in overseeing property crimes like thefts and robberies, while female suspects are engaged in pickpocketing and shoplifting. Other suspects are in charge of the management of the family criminal business and the laundering of the illegal profits. Transportation of child victims from origin to destination countries is sometimes tasked to members of the network or may be outsourced to other facilitators.

Geographical dimension

The geographical span of these family clans provides opportunities to rotate victims among the families of the clan in different locations, to facilitate the commitment of crime and the concealment of their identities. There does not appear to be an established trend for the means of transporting victims across the EU. Children are transferred by private vehicles and public transport, they also board flights (unaccompanied) and are met later by other associates at the destination. In some instances they may travel with their trafficker.

Modus operandi

Recruitment

Most of the networks investigated had a large pool of children to exploit (in one case more than 90 minors were identified as victims). Apart from cases in which suspects coerce their own children, criminals abuse minors unrelated to clan members, often victimised as a result of an involvement of the children's families, who had given

their consent (sometimes providing suspects with written statements) for the children to travel around Europe along with their exploiters.

Unrelated victims came from families with poor living conditions, unemployed or in financial trouble. Families have been reported to have lent their children to the traffickers in exchange for money, while in other cases the family had contracted earlier debts with the criminal network and gave their children away as a form of compensation.

In order to legalise the guardianship of the unrelated minors, female victims were occasionally abducted through the lover boy method or even forced to get married to members of the family clan without their consent.

OCG countermeasures against law enforcement

Victims' documents are taken away by the traffickers to avoid recognition in case of detection by law enforcement. In addition suspects often do not carry any ID and regularly use altered details or lookalike documents when identified by police in the different countries and cities.

Victims are generally accommodated on the same premises as the rest of the family. When committing crimes, they are taken or sent relatively far from their domestic address (sometimes they are located close to national borders and sent to other countries), only returning to the accommodation at the end of the day.

As another countermeasure to avoid detection, suspects recruit 'new' children on a regular basis in the pool of beggars and/or thieves under their control. In a case of one of the most extended family clans, newly enrolled child victims were sent to 'training centres' managed by affiliates of the family clan, where they would teach newcomers a variety of pickpocketing and shoplifting techniques, before deploying them to different locations

around Europe.

During this phase, a false identity was provided to the victims (who would also be induced in undertaking a sort of impersonation training, to become confident in using aliases in case of police arrest). Sometimes the real identity documents of the victims were then used by the criminal group to perform money transfers among members and for benefit fraud purposes.

These criminal networks sometimes abuse children with physical disabilities, who are forced to beg on the streets, in busy public areas for many hours per day. On these occasions, victims are accompanied by an older member of the network, who immediately collects the earnings for the benefit of the OCG.

Psychological coercion and physical violence of the victims occurs regularly to make victims more submissive, irrespective of the relationship between the criminals and victims. In particular, the unrelated victims are kept in captivity until they succumb to the will of the traffickers. Adult suspects often assault those victims who refuse to obey or cooperate.

Due to regular rotation and language difficulties, victims are completely controlled by their exploiters, often unable to communicate with others except criminal network members. Minor victims are indoctrinated by their older suspects to the point that they choose to become crime facilitators and, in turn, active members of the criminal group.

Quite often, victims who have been exploited from very young age develop affiliation sentiments towards their exploiters, feeling a sense of belonging to the family business, without the ability to differentiate between legal and illegal behaviour (similar to Stockholm syndrome). These victims tend not to cooperate with law enforcement and are violent when they are forcibly separated from their environment.

Criminal profits

Stolen goods are typically converted into cash, which is reported to be sent via money transfer systems (Western Union and similar) among the various members of the OCG. Sometimes criminal profits are used for household expenses, for the transportation of children, or to fund other criminal activities in the OCG portfolio.

When intelligence on financial modus operandi was gathered, it showed patterns of financial transactions from countries of exploitation to countries of origins and vice versa, often using genuine or forged documents of either victims or perpetrators.

Links to other crimes

The investigated family clans were known to be involved in a series of crimes. Some crimes were directly linked to the trafficking business like document and identity fraud, money laundering, property crimes, and in some cases in benefit fraud. Often adult members were reportedly involved in other criminality such as robberies and aggravated thefts. In some cases, the network was also involved in gambling, prostitution, drugs trafficking and possession of illegal firearms. Sometimes they were wanted by several Member States.

4.3 OCGs trafficking children for benefit fraud

Europol regularly receives information on criminal networks specialised in trafficking victims to other countries in order to exploit the welfare system. The criminal group claims, using victims' identity documents, a number of economic benefits including: for unemployment, for large families, and for families with young children. This form of exploitation usually overlaps with other forms of labour exploitation, forced begging or forced criminality.

Structure of the criminal networks involved

Criminal networks reported mainly originated from the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania and were victimising mainly co-nationals. The larger networks had cells in both origin and destination countries, while the smaller ones were composed of only one operative group established in the exploitation country, with members going back to their country of origin only to target new victims. In some cases the suspects involved already had convictions for offences related to THB and money laundering in their country of origin or elsewhere in the EU.

Modus operandi

The modus operandi varied significantly, as each criminal group organised the exploitation according to the situation of their victims, adjusting the level of sophistication. Some OCGs trafficked entire families, while others abducted children from their families and transferred them to another country, putting them in the hands of associated couples who registered the child as theirs. Other traffickers kept abducted children in captivity, setting up bogus companies through which they would claim various types of benefits.

Victims were sometimes exploited by members of their own family, who relocated them for free in another country, then stole their identity and generated profit by claiming benefits. Member States where the welfare system for non-residents is particularly advanced (the UK for example) were a particular target country. There, in a few cases both adult and minor victims were kept in captivity and the adults were also abused by the criminal enterprise through forced labour.

Document fraud

Document fraud is commonly used by traffickers to conceal the identity of the victims during their transport and to register the victims in various

municipality registers. Especially when the children are abducted alone, traffickers use forged documents claiming to be their legal guardians or close relatives. Sometimes criminals obtain passports for several children from their country of origin, and using only the travel document they try to claim benefits in another country.

4.4 EU networks trafficking minors for labour exploitation

Several cases were supported by Europol involving criminal groups exploiting minors of EU nationality for labour exploitation. Victims were both boys and girls mostly between 13 and 18 years of age. They were exploited to work illegally for the criminal networks, and often recruited alongside adult victims by the same criminal group. The very low reporting of this kind of crime suggests that the real scale at EU level may be much greater.

Structure of the criminal networks and features

The criminal networks mostly reported comprised suspects originating from Bulgaria, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, who shared the same origins as their victims, exploited minors or their parents for labour purposes and also abused the children to perpetrate benefit fraud. Two cases were reported of criminal networks which also had some non-EU members.

The groups were relatively small, composed of three to seven suspects, both male and female, divided in cells varying in number according to the level of organisation and sophistication needed for the criminal enterprise and the form of exploitation. In most cases, the suspects already had criminal convictions in their country of origin, and in one case two of the main suspects had previously been reported to Europol in connection with another international case of THB.

Some members of the OCG always

shared the same nationality as their victims. These suspects were responsible for victim recruitment and housing, while the exploitation was organised and operated by the non-EU suspects. Some of the victims were recruited through trafficking networks and employed by third parties; other criminal enterprises were controlling the whole criminal business: recruiting and exploiting victims in various locations across the EU.

Modus operandi

Recruitment

The means of recruitment varies quite considerably, however the family always plays a central role in the process. Some girls were reported to have been recruited through the same lover boy method that is most commonly used for sexually exploited minors. In one case of forced labour in the agricultural sector, the internet was the means of communication through which the recruiter first got in touch with the victim. Later, she married him and travelled with him to another country, despite her young age. Eventually the victim found herself forced to work for her husband's family, which ran a labour exploitation camp abroad.

In exchange for money some minors have been given to the traffickers by their parents along with notarial documents that formalise the approval of the family for border crossing purposes. Other minors, looking for a job to support themselves, were recruited through word of mouth and transferred with adult victims to the place of exploitation in groups.

In one case of an OCG with mixed nationalities, EU recruiters targeted a co-national minor victim promising her a well-paid job in the hospitality sector in another EU country. Once the victim had fallen into the hands of the traffickers, she was transported to a different city from the one agreed. There she was handed over to a non-EU associate, who employed her as a

cleaner in a takeaway and forced her to live onsite for almost no pay.

The EU suspect established contact with the non-EU associate through a job board website and charged of a fee of several hundreds of euros for the employment of the victim. The main suspect set up a business to work with several potential exploiters within the EU simultaneously, identifying victims to suit the profile required by the exploiters.

Exploitation

Usually criminals exploiting minors for labour purposes organise their business in particularly clandestine conditions for fear of drawing public attention and potential involvement of law enforcement authorities. Most reported minors were exploited in the agricultural sector, both in seasonal jobs and year-round employment. They were placed in rural areas relatively far from towns and villages. The fact that the minor victims exploited for labour are placed in remote areas puts them even in more danger.

Countermeasures against law enforcement

Suspects deprive victims of their documents immediately after their arrival to the final destination. They lodge the victims near to where they will be exploited, in crumbling buildings where groups of adults and minors are forced to survive for months in conditions unfit for human habitation. Usually they are forced to work many hours per day, without observing any of the conditions set during their recruitment or obtaining the agreed pay, working outside of labour laws. Usually the conditions of employment do not meet and safety and security standards.

The supply of food and other essentials is organised by the group. Lodging and catering expenses are deducted from the already small wages paid to the victims, so that debt bondage is

created. The victims are threatened and forced to obey to their exploiters until they repay all the money. The extreme conditions in which the victims are forced to live and work have an impact on their psychological stability, making them even more fragile and vulnerable to the control of the traffickers.

Conclusions

In Europe thousands of minors, from both EU and non-EU countries continue to be trafficked and exploited to generate profits for criminal networks and even more face the risk of exploitation. Europol increasingly receives information on trafficking networks operating across Member States, taking advantage of the vulnerability of children, to sexually exploit them, and to abuse them in labour exploitation. Other criminal groups place victims on the streets to beg for money, force them to commit various types of crimes, sell them through illegal adoption schemes and defraud the welfare state.

Children particularly at risk include those from distressed families; who are orphaned; face economic hardship; who are socially excluded, and little hope for their future, or are displaced due to conflict in their country of origin. In other instances, families hand over their children to exploiters, sometimes ignoring the risks linked to this action with the hope of improving the life chances of their offspring. In other cases, families are complicit in the organised criminal exploitation of their own children.

Risks of the exploitation of children in migration have increased dramatically in recent years. The outbreak of the

migration crisis in 2015 led thousands of vulnerable minors to enter the EU, many of them unaccompanied or accompanied by unrelated adults. Due to the unprecedented influx, Member States struggled to provide appropriate support to these minors and control their further movements within Europe²⁷.

Apart from trafficked children who were recruited while trying to escape conflicts and political or economic instability in their own countries, families in distress may consider their offspring should be working and contributing money to the family by whatever means. EU institutions, national governments, law enforcement authorities, non-governmental organisations, and civilian associations, together with the private sector and all EU citizens, are called to prevent and fight the trafficking of children in a coordinated way, ensure protection and security for these most vulnerable victims.

Europol is on the front line together with EU Member States in disrupting international criminal organisations that take advantage of this vulnerable category of people. Europol provides active operational support to investigators across the entire European Union.

²⁷ Europol's European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA) 2017.

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