

UNITED KINGDOM

The United Kingdom (UK) has predominantly been considered a destination country for human trafficking, with both domestic and foreign nationals trafficked into or within the country. While victims are reported from a variety of source countries, the most commonly reported nationalities are British, Albanian and Vietnamese. In recent years, there have been increasing reports of domestic trafficking of UK nationals trafficked for labour or criminal exploitation.

Overall, for victimised adults, labour exploitation remains the most common exploitation type reported, involving a wide variety of industries including 'agriculture, cannabis cultivation, construction, food processing, domestic services, nail salons, hospitality and car washes'.¹ Reports of trafficking of minors have increased over the last few years with just under half of referrals into the National Referral Mechanism in 2020 concerning potential child victims.² A substantial number (40%)³ of these referrals involved children forced into criminal exploitation through county lines.⁴

COVID-19 Impact on Human Trafficking

Commencing March 2020, the UK Government enforced mandatory lockdown measures, imposing a stay-at-home order and forcing all non-essential businesses, schools and workplaces to close. While schools initially reopened in early September, regional tiered restrictions were re-imposed with a nationwide lockdown enforced for the final three months of 2020. Throughout the pandemic, the government banned all non-essential travel, with restrictions in travelling to and from certain countries, but the UK border was not officially closed at any point in 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to significant concerns for exploited individuals and certain vulnerable groups in the UK. Enforced restrictions risked further isolating victims and detrimentally affecting the most vulnerable, including migrants, those working in the informal sector, and minors.⁵ In 2020, the majority of potential victims disclosed their exploitation occurred in the UK, with two-thirds of reports in the final quarter of 2020 involving domestic exploitation.⁶ This noted trend differs from previous years, where individuals typically reported that they had been exploited elsewhere prior to their voluntary relocation into the UK. This increase in domestic exploitation

might be attributed to stringent COVID-19 travel regulations restricting movement across international borders. Consequently, vulnerability of those already victimised in the UK became further magnified as perpetrators 'increased reliance on the existing victim pool in the UK' and sought to 're-engage with victims from whom they were not able to profit over lockdown'.⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted and exacerbated vulnerabilities to trafficking and exploitation generally. Due to increased unemployment, individuals appeared more willing to pursue potentially false or illegitimate job opportunities.

The pandemic also severely impacted already vulnerable workers, particularly undocumented migrants placed at increased risk of exploitation by virtue of working illegally, and the general shifting informal labour economy.⁸ Often, these individuals do not report their exploitation for fear of legal ramifications due to their immigration status, permitting employers to continue to exploit them without repercussions. The COVID-19 travel restrictions in the UK exacerbated these already existing vulnerabilities, with migrant workers unable to work due to government-mandated closures of non-essential business, but also unable to return to their home countries. Reports suggest that the closure of such workplaces did not cease the exploitation, but merely resulted in transferring these same migrants to work in other sectors, including cannabis cultivation, factories or agricultural work.⁹



A21's Response

A21 has operated in the UK since 2012, and combats human trafficking through prevention and awareness, training of frontline professionals, victim identification operations and supporting international repatriations and referrals. The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing restrictions required A21 UK to readjust its strategy to comply with the constantly changing measures and ensure the continuation of programs and services.



Prevention & Awareness

A21 UK's prevention and awareness programs provide information on human trafficking in the UK through educational sessions in schools, targeted media campaigns and community-based awareness presentations to increase prevention and safeguarding efforts within specific communities. Due to the cancellation of most in-person events, consistent with COVID-19 restrictions, A21 UK adapted its programs to be delivered via online means. These prevention and awareness sessions were presented to students, businesses and community groups through various online platforms to educate on human trafficking and encourage public reporting. Additionally, as a part of its awareness efforts during the pandemic, A21 UK participated in a radio station interview with an estimated audience of tens of thousands to provide basic information about recognising and reporting human trafficking in the UK.

A21 UK works actively in schools to present the topic of human trafficking to both students and educators across various levels of education. School closures resulted in the increased use of online platforms for educational and entertainment purposes, which both provided new opportunities but also heightened vulnerability to online exploitation as perpetrators also increased their presence on online platforms. With schools closed intermittently throughout 2020, A21 UK adjusted its approach and provided resources through online sessions delivered to school groups on human trafficking and the dangers of online

exploitation. A21 also provided other educational materials, adapting already existing resources into online modified versions including the 'Bodies Are Not Commodities curriculum' (BANC). All A21 programs including the Human Trafficking Awareness Program (HTAP) and the 'Can You See Me?'¹⁰ campaign videos and accompanying educational material were made available and distributed to educators during the pandemic for use in their online classes. Through the shift to online efforts, A21 UK delivered prevention and awareness activities to 16 UK schools, educating over 5,000 students from ages ten to eighteen nationwide in 2020.

A21 first launched its global 'Can You See Me?' (CYSM) public awareness campaign in the UK in 2016, and since then the campaign materials have been distributed and utilised by partner organisations at local, regional, national and global levels. Through partnerships with government bodies, NGOs, and public and private businesses, the CYSM campaign has been broadly utilised across multiple channels. One notable example is the use of the campaign materials across numerous UK airports, including Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted, and other transportation hubs in the UK, such as local train stations, as both a prevention and reporting mechanism to be able to highlight the reality of human trafficking occurring across the transportation sector. In light of the increase in reports of domestic violence and exploitative practices in the UK during the pandemic, A21 UK released an additional campaign scenario highlighting domestic violence in the context of human trafficking, and distributed these new materials to key partners in the UK to raise awareness.

Given the cancellation of all in-person events, social media provided an opportune way of reaching a large audience base with key information and resources on human trafficking. A21 UK shared awareness materials, such as the digital online safety brochure, on social media channels to raise awareness of the dangers of online exploitation. In response to the pandemic, A21 UK developed a new targeted prevention campaign highlighting prevalent vulnerability factors, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, that were known to underlie common trafficking and exploitation situations. The development of this new social media campaign, provided timely information at the start of lockdown, highlighting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in increasing vulnerability factors including unemployment, poverty and online exploitation. This campaign utilised both informational grid posts and accompanying Instagram stories to discuss in detail a different vulnerability factor, and to explain the intersection of that vulnerability and the potential exploitation. The two week campaign resulted in a potential estimated reach of 10,000 viewers across social media channels, presenting both important prevention information and the proper reporting mechanism. Throughout the pandemic, A21 UK utilised social media to partner with key organisations and supporters virtually with events such as the London Marathon 2.6 challenge raising awareness of human trafficking, reaching

34,406 viewers across a week-long event. A21 UK also increased online activity through designated social media channels, hosting live events on Instagram featuring different topics including online child exploitation and the impact of COVID-19 on A21's work globally. A total of 50,000 people were reached through these live events.

Identification & Intervention Efforts

The identification and intervention of victims of human trafficking encompasses A21 UK's operational activity. These efforts are predominantly outworked through supporting proactive identification activities and delivering professional training to those working in key frontline sectors. In 2020 however, the majority of these activities were either postponed, cancelled, or significantly scaled-down due to national COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Consequently, A21 UK experienced a decrease in the identification of both victims and potential victims of trafficking as well as a decrease in referrals for support, such as repatriation assistance, in 2020.

PROFESSIONAL FRONTLINE TRAINING

A21 UK regularly delivers professional training to various frontline sectors to support the identification of victims of human trafficking. In 2020, A21 UK trained frontline professionals from law enforcement, healthcare, immigration and transportation sectors. As the COVID-19 pandemic limited most in-person training, A21 delivered training sessions via online platforms. While certain challenges accompanied web-based training, the adaptation to online sessions provided the flexibility to increase attendance and granted access to those whose schedules or locations would not normally permit in-person attendance. The versatility of online sessions increased the attendance of healthcare professionals in particular whose rigorous and diverse schedules often resulted in certain attendance limitations. A21 UK historically has provided training to UK Border Force as well as a number of health care providers. In 2020, A21 UK continued to provide training as part of mandatory Safeguarding Level 3 training across the healthcare sector.¹¹ In addition to continuing to provide training for new UK Border Force recruits, A21 UK also trained two new law enforcement partners based across various major UK airports and transportation hubs. In 2020, A21 UK trained 214 UK Border Force officers to identify, engage with and safeguard potential victims of trafficking. The delivery of these training sessions in 2020 ensured that frontline professionals were aware of developing human trafficking trends and increased vulnerabilities resulting from COVID-19 restrictions. Law enforcement and healthcare professionals in particular greatly benefited from these sessions, where discussions around

recent cases increased understanding of heightened vulnerability factors and barriers to identification. These sessions coupled with hands-on operations during the pandemic assisted frontline professionals to be informed of new safeguarding strategies.



COVID-19 IMPACT ON IDENTIFICATION AND PROACTIVE OPERATIONS

A21 UK regularly supports a range of identification and intervention efforts in collaboration with various frontline entities, with the purpose to identify and provide support to victims and potential victims of human trafficking in the UK. The majority of identifications from A21 UK originate from proactive operations supporting law enforcement and frontline officials, where active profiling often leads to encountering potential victims of trafficking. A21 UK has been supporting these proactive identification operations for six years, providing assistance in several ways from providing interpretation, advising on cases and assisting with victim identification screenings. When coordinating these operations, utilising a victim-centred approach may involve working with a non-governmental organisation (NGO) to assist in the identification and provide any necessary support for potential victims encountered. Often exploited individuals may be hesitant to speak directly to law enforcement due to their immigration status, involvement in criminal activity while trafficked, or simply due to a general distrust of law enforcement based on past experiences in their home country. In these unique situations, non-governmental organisations can assist as an 'advocate' to support potential victims' immediate needs and provide any necessary subsequent support. Through this approach, A21 UK has been able to increase the likelihood of successful interventions initiated by law enforcement.

While the UK border did not close at any point during the COVID-19 pandemic, certain travel restrictions enforced throughout 2020 significantly affected passenger numbers. At the outset of the pandemic, government-mandated lockdown and travel restrictions

limited A21's ability to participate in proactive operations to identify and safeguard potential victims. However, when select law enforcement-led lockdown-exempt activities were permitted, A21 UK continued to work in partnership with law enforcement upon request.

Based on A21 UK's experience in 2020, despite lockdown restrictions, a substantial decrease in travel and a significantly reduced number of passengers, traffickers continued to use regular transportation routes, including commercial airlines, to transport victims across transnational borders.

A21 UK experienced this first hand while providing support in one multi-agency operation at an airport amid the pandemic in 2020 where a trafficker was apprehended and five potential victims of trafficking safeguarded while attempting to enter the UK.

A21 UK routinely supports identification screenings as part of these activities. These screenings seek to establish whether or not a situation constitutes a possible exploitative situation, to identify potential victims, assess the need for care and coordinate any necessary services. Screenings often reveal certain vulnerabilities and safeguarding concerns that help to determine elements of force, fraud or coercion. In A21's experience, a screening interview for example may reveal that a third-party facilitated travel arrangements, or provided identity documents or passports. Several cases supported by A21 UK involved potentially exploitative job opportunities where individuals were recruited into vulnerable employment situations, lacking any substantial details of employment or living arrangements. In many cases, employers told individuals that jobs had been arranged but did not provide basic details or an employment contract. Individuals are often willing to travel to the UK without being provided with basic information including the location of the prospective employment, specific wages, or even the industry in which they will be working. Many had limited funds or lacked the financial means to support themselves, making them reliant on others. These indicators often place individuals at higher risk of exploitation or debt bondage situations, where the victimised is coerced into staying in an exploitative situation to pay off the 'debt' incurred for the initial cost to enter the UK, such as for travel expenses or rent.

A21 UK also regularly provides trained interpreters at no cost during these operations, to both interact directly with the potential victim and to provide interpretation for law enforcement. Interpretation continues to be an important part of safeguarding efforts in providing the opportunity for individuals to speak in their preferred first language, as many potential victims are foreign nationals. Often the interpreters are of the same ethnicity as the potential victim and

can create familiarity and comfort as well as provide cultural context to law enforcement. A21 UK continued to provide interpretation services in 2020, although the availability of in-person translation proved challenging at times due to the pandemic. On occasion when confronted with such a shortage, A21 UK was able to provide translation by connecting with the A21 office in the potential victim's home country. A21 UK first utilised this approach in 2020 when confronted with translation needs for Bulgarian nationals encountered during a victim identification operation. A21 UK contacted the A21 operated National Human Trafficking Hotline in Bulgaria and the potential victims successfully received translation over the phone from Bulgarian call specialists. The immediate availability of an interpreter to engage in the individual's first language exemplifies a victim-centred approach, helps to build trust, and creates a safe environment that encourages disclosure.

Repatriation & Aftercare Services

Upon identification, A21 UK often facilitates the repatriation of survivors and potential victims from pre-departure to post-arrival. As A21 operates in numerous countries, including common origin and transit countries, A21 UK is often well positioned to coordinate support services. When facilitating repatriation services, A21 UK takes into consideration any safeguarding concerns upon return, such as the risk of re-trafficking. These risks could exist if for example a family member or neighbour originally trafficked the individual, and therefore the potential victim's return to the same community would heighten the risk of re-victimisation. In these cases, A21 UK will often arrange for either the A21 office in that country or a trusted partner organisation to facilitate on-the-ground support post-repatriation to ensure the individual is properly assisted and safeguarded. In one case in 2020, where due to safeguarding concerns a 'family' of adults and minors were going to be refused entry to the UK and returned, A21 UK proactively coordinated holistic support with the A21 office in Bulgaria, facilitating assistance from pre-departure to post-arrival. This support included interpretation and screening assistance, engaging law enforcement in both countries and coordinating ongoing support once returned. This holistic approach to repatriation encompasses a victim-centred approach, ensuring support at every stage throughout the process. In the past, A21 UK has received ongoing referral requests to provide repatriation or other services. However, due to COVID-19 and border closures, A21 UK noticed limited requests for referrals and a visible decrease in the number of repatriations facilitated.

A21 UK has historically supported survivors of human trafficking residing in partner shelters, safe-house accommodation and those living independently in the community, by providing gift hampers over

the Christmas period. In 2020, A21 UK distributed 36 hampers to survivors, 14 hampers to children of survivors, as well as extra emergency supply packs to shelters and partner organisations. These hampers include personal gift items, including confectionery, clothing and beauty gift sets to bring enjoyment, provide a sense of comfort and alleviate isolation and loneliness, especially in light of the isolation experienced by so many in 2020. The children's hampers were customised to

be age and gender appropriate, consisting of clothing and nappies as well as soft toys and gift items. These hampers were especially important in 2020 as lockdown restrictions isolated many survivors, and the economic impact of COVID-19 caused many survivors to struggle both financially and emotionally. Additionally, A21 UK provided emergency packs to partner shelters consisting of basic essentials including toiletries and hygiene items.

Collaboration Results in a Successful Intervention

A21 UK's operational activities include supporting outreach activities to identify and safeguard potential victims of human trafficking. These operations seek to bring together relevant stakeholders to support identification efforts including law enforcement, government agencies and non-governmental organisations.

A21 is often invited to these operations to act as an advocate in assisting the identification and safeguarding of potential victims of trafficking who may be encountered. In one operation in 2020, A21 UK supported UK law enforcement with the screening of Bulgarian nationals, with translation support provided telephonically by A21 Bulgaria. As significant safeguarding concerns were raised during this encounter, A21 UK and A21 Bulgaria, alongside law enforcement in the respective countries, were able to support

repatriation efforts. A21 UK worked closely with UK law enforcement to coordinate contact on arrival of the repatriated survivors with A21 Bulgaria. Simultaneously, A21 Bulgaria worked closely with the Bulgarian authorities to provide further on-the-ground safeguarding assistance for the survivors post-arrival. In this case, the global nature of A21's work proved invaluable to support both survivors of trafficking and authorities on the ground across two countries, thus providing bilateral support in both the destination and origin countries. This particular case illustrates that given the often transnational nature of the crime of human trafficking, through collaboration of key stakeholders in the relevant countries, and the ability to provide holistic support throughout the different stages of an exploited individual's journey, successful intervention of human trafficking can occur.

¹ United States Department of State, 2020 Trafficking in Persons Report, June 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/united-states/>.

² Home Office, Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics UK 2020, 2020.

³ 'County lines' is the term used to refer to the illicit drug trade by highly organised crime groups that recruit vulnerable young people to transport drugs across the country and use dedicated mobile phone 'lines' to communicate.

⁴ Home Office, Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics UK 2020, 2020.

⁵ UK Government, 2020 UK Annual Report on Modern Slavery, 2020.

⁶ Home Office, Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics UK, Quarter 4 2020 – October to December 2020

⁷ UK Government, 2020 UK Annual Report on Modern Slavery, 2020.

⁸ Focus On Labour Exploitation (FLEX). Briefing: No Worker Left Behind: Protecting Vulnerable Workers From Exploitation During And After The Coronavirus (Covid-19) Pandemic 2020

⁹ The Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, 'It Still Happens Here: Fighting Modern Slavery in the 2020s', July 2020.

¹⁰ The 'Can You See Me?' (CYSM) campaign is a global anti-human trafficking public awareness campaign of A21. The concept behind CYSM focuses on the 'hidden but in plain sight' reality that underlies human trafficking. This campaign seeks to educate the public with the subtle indicators of human trafficking in order to expose a seemingly innocuous situation with the reality of the human trafficking that is occurring. As the campaign is country or region-specific, various iterations of the campaign exist specific to the country/region of distribution. CYSM focuses on collaborating with relevant stakeholders in the particular country. In each country, CYSM has a call to action and provides the relevant hotline for that country.

¹¹ Section 12.12 of the UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 Statutory Guidance for England and Wales published by the UK Home Office states that it is imperative that 'individuals acting as First Responders have adequate training to ensure they are clear about the steps they should take in the event that they identify a possible victim or victims of modern slavery' as well as 'all relevant frontline staff have received basic awareness training on what modern slavery and human trafficking is, identifying indicators of modern slavery and human trafficking and groups at particular risk.' Healthcare workers for purposes of this Act are considered to be First Responders.