

Gangs use top schools to traffic Asian girls

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Private schools are making hundreds of thousands of pounds from Vietnamese children who are entering Britain on student visas then disappearing, *The Times* can reveal.

Children as young as 15 are being brought to the UK by suspected trafficking gangs through legitimate visas sponsored by private schools.

The students typically pay a term's fees then go missing within weeks or months of starting at the school. Many disappear into the system and are left at risk of exploitation in nail bars, cannabis farms and brothels.

An investigation by this newspaper has uncovered at least 21 Vietnamese children who have vanished from boarding schools and private colleges across Britain in the past four years. They are mostly girls with what is known as the "private school visa".

The findings raise concerns that traffickers are exploiting the visas to bring in children from Vietnam. The police and the Home Office are investigating the disappearances, but many of the youngsters remain unaccounted for.

One girl who disappeared at 16 has been missing for three years and several others have been discovered working in nail bars across Britain.

The revelations come as Vietnamese police made eight arrests after 39 people were found dead inside a lorry trailer in Essex last month.

Nguyen Huu Cau, the police chief of Nghe An province, where many of the victims are believed to have originated, said: "Based on what we learn from the suspects, we will actively launch investigations to fight and eradicate these rings which bring people illegally to Britain.

"The best thing to do now is to deal with the consequences of the incident and help family members receive the bodies."

There were two arrests in Vietnam on Friday and others were taken in for questioning over the incident.

Vietnamese citizens are consistently in the top three nationalities at risk of trafficking in Britain.

The charity Every Child Protected Against Trafficking, which works with child victims, has reported a rise in Vietnamese referrals, from 135 in 2012 to 704 last year.

Eight Vietnamese children have gone missing from the £25,000-a-year Chelsea Independent College, a west London school owned by Astrum Education. According to a former member of staff, one girl ran away at night through a fire escape. The disappearances were said to have caused panic among staff, who feared a scandal.

At Abbey College in Malvern, Worcestershire, which says that it has educated “the children and grandchildren of kings, heads of state and other pre-eminent global figures”, a 15-year-old girl from Vietnam who started at the school in September 2017 failed to return after Christmas. The girl, from the rural Quang Ninh province, close to where many of the Essex victims had lived, was found more than a year later, working at a cash-only nail bar in Yorkshire.

At DLD College in London, which is part of the same corporate group as the prep school attended by the Dukes of Cambridge and Sussex, three Vietnamese girls went missing soon after starting. One was aged 15.

Four Vietnamese pupils have gone missing since 2016 from Cambridge Tutors College in Croydon, south London, including a 16-year-old girl who disappeared from a homestay family. David Wilson, a former principal, said: “That rang alarm bells about sex trafficking. It became a bit of a scandal.”

The Bellerbys school group, which offers “international students English-language and university preparation”, reported the disappearance of three Vietnamese students from its colleges in London and Brighton. A former teacher said: “At holidays they wouldn’t come back: there would be no answer on the phone. It was a loophole: someone realised this was a way of getting Vietnamese girls into the system.”

Brooke House College, Leicestershire, which recruits heavily in international markets, said that two Vietnamese students had absconded.

Pat Saini, an immigration lawyer from the firm Penningtons Manches Cooper, which was consulted by a number of schools, called the disappearances “the worst safeguarding issue that we have come across”, adding: “People [from the schools] were out looking for students in certain parts of the country. They were hunting round some towns and helping with the police. We were living and breathing this with our clients, [asking] where are your 15-year-olds?”

The Independent Schools Council and the Boarding Schools’ Association wrote to members in 2017 warning them to be “vigilant” when accepting Vietnamese students.

All the schools and colleges identified by The Times followed protocol and reported the disappearances to the police and the Home Office. All the children arrived in Britain on Tier 4 child visas, which are sponsored by schools and do not require an English language test.

The teenagers either boarded or were placed with host families and paid £5,000 to £10,000 for the first term but then disappeared within weeks. The Home Office approves 666 independent schools to sponsor overseas students for child visas. In 2017 Vietnamese citizens received 220 Tier 4 child visas.

Yvette Cooper, chairwoman of the home affairs select committee, called on the Home Office to urgently address the visa manipulation. “This is truly shocking,” she said. “To have children coming thousands of miles from home supposedly to learn but in fact being shipped into slavery in Britain is unthinkable.” She added that schools “need to take some responsibility for their recruiting”.

All the schools named by this newspaper have passed Home Office inspections and remain licensed visa sponsors. A Home Office spokesman said: “The safety and welfare of children is a key consideration of any child student application, with written consent from parents and evidence of adequate childcare arrangements required.”

Astrum Education Group said it had been targeted by organised criminal activity. It has reviewed its safeguarding procedures. Malcolm Wood, principal of Abbey College, said: “We took this case extremely seriously. No failings by this college were found by any of the authorities who looked into this case.”

DLD college said: “The safety and wellbeing of our students has always been our No 1 priority.” The college has since revised its admission and sponsorship policy for Vietnam.

Bellerby’s said: “We co-operate fully with the relevant authorities to help them with their inquiries. The safety and security of our students is of utmost importance.”

Mike Oliver, principal of Brooke House College, said it had been praised in a multi-agency review for prompt action after the disappearances.

CTC failed to comment before publication.