

The Times view on trafficking via public schools: Lost Girls

Another disgraceful human trafficking scandal has enveloped Britain

Hard on the heels of the horrific deaths of 39 migrants in a refrigerated lorry in Essex comes another disturbing story of human trafficking. An investigation by The Times has found that in the past four years at least 21 Vietnamese teenagers have vanished from elite boarding schools and private colleges in Britain. Several of the missing children, who are mostly girls, were later found working in nail bars. Most remain unaccounted for. They appear to be victims of trafficking gangs, who have been exploiting a loophole in Britain's visa rules to bring minors into the country, supposedly to study at private schools.

These teenagers had arrived on so-called Tier 4 child visas, which are sponsored by private schools and require only parental consent and proof that there is enough money to pay a year's fees. Most of the missing teenagers, who like many of the victims in the lorry deaths were from poor rural communities in Vietnam, had paid up to £10,000 in fees to gain places at top private sixth-form colleges such as DLD College London, which educated the writer Phoebe Waller-Bridge. These schools often depend financially on their foreign students. Some pupils vanished in the holidays after their first term, others after only a few weeks. It is as yet unclear whether the traffickers engineered the transfer of their victims from Vietnam to Britain, or whether they closed in on them once they had arrived.

The cases uncovered by this newspaper, which date back to 2015, appear to be the first involving the abuse of this particular visa system. Yet the trafficking of Vietnamese people into Britain is shamefully prevalent. They are consistently identified in Britain's top three nationalities most at risk of trafficking. The missing children are feared to be in danger of exploitation in cannabis farms and brothels. One girl who disappeared at 16 has been missing for three years.

How so many Vietnamese teenagers could vanish without raising greater alarm among the authorities and institutions responsible for them is deeply troubling. The schools involved say that they correctly followed protocol. They called the police and reported the matter to the Home Office. But that still leaves many unanswered questions. Eight Vietnamese children disappeared from schools owned by the glossy Chelsea Independent College in west London. Four have gone missing from Cambridge Tutors College in Croydon. In early 2017 the Independent Schools Council and the Boarding Schools' Association even warned members to be "vigilant" about accepting pupils from Vietnam. Once one pupil had disappeared from an establishment what was done to safeguard other Vietnamese children — to prevent them from suffering the same fate?

There are questions for the Home Office too. The eight establishments identified by this newspaper had all passed Home Office inspections to enable them to be licensed as visa sponsors. Are these inspections sufficiently rigorous? And despite evidence that Tier 4 child visas have been used for trafficking, the Home Office has done nothing to tighten the regulations around them. In 2017, indeed, 220 of these visas were granted to Vietnamese citizens. As an

institution that likes to present itself as being at the global forefront of the campaign against human trafficking, this is particularly shameful.