

Dawn raids reveal misery of child trafficking

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Totnes mp Anthony Steen has revealed more details of joining the Met police in dawn raids during a crackdown on child trafficking and multi-million pound benefit frauds.

Mr Steen, who is a strong campaigner against human trafficking, has spoken of the level of deprivation he found on the operation to stamp out the £40million a year trade in Ilford, North London.

The operation, which was revealed by the Herald Express on Thursday, was followed on the front page of the Sunday Times yesterday.

In one virtually unfurnished two-bed terraced house, police found five adults and nine children at one address.

One was a 24-year-old mother of five children.

In a second two-bed terraced house, police found 11 children in allegedly one family.

The eldest was 15 years old and pregnant.

Up to five slept on bedding on the floor in one room, considered to be low density.

It is estimated one child can earn up to £100,000 a year for gang lords through fraudulent benefit claims and illegal working.

Mr Steen said: "This trade in children is incredibly hard to stamp out.

"Each child represents an income stream.

"The market value of a child is around £20,000 - a real bargain as at the top end, a child can earn up to £100,000 per year for the gang."

It is estimated up to 200 children are working in UK cities like London, Manchester and Leeds.

The Met Police has identified more than 366 such children who are permanently in the UK or Spain.

But the number is thought to be closer to 1,000.

To minimise business interruption, the gangs move child workers from house to house and from country to country.

Gangmasters cover the operating costs of the women and their child 'bread-winners' by claiming UK benefits and then skim off the profit, with the majority of benefits claimed sent back to Romania.

On one operation, police trawled the contents of a house and found £1,500 cash in one room and meticulous bank records showing £24,000, £20,000 and £18,000 paid in tax credits, backdated.

Mr Steen said: "The reality of this trade in which children are merely commodities to be bought, sold and exploited for fraud and for profit, is quite shocking.

"All the children have never been to school, could not read or write and have a future based only in organised crime.

"The impact in human and economic terms is enormous as well as its knock-on effect on levels of crime and police resources in the UK.

"The cumulative effect for the future is terrifying."

He said legislation exists to deal with trafficking in all EU countries.

But it is enforcement and implementation which is lacking.

Mr Steen said: "The police are bedside themselves.

"Often, many of the children are too young and cannot be arrested. The only way they can interview them is to remove them to a place of safety.

"There is no question of fostering as few foster parents are Romanian and none are 'Roma'.

"If they are sent back to Romania they will reappear on London or Madrid streets in a few months, having been trafficked."