

Immigration Watch International

Tandarei: The faraway town fat on UK benefit fraud

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What is only hinted at below is that most, if not all, of the illegals would have been Gypsies. Minor crime is the traditional Gypsy occupation

Two months ago, a group of 10 bedraggled and bewildered-looking Romanians arrived at immigration control at Stansted airport in Essex on a flight from Bucharest. They had no luggage, spoke no English and had no apparent means of support. One of the group was an alcoholic and another a drug addict.

According to police intelligence, they were benefit “mules”, sent to the UK with the task of claiming benefits for an organised crime gang. Already prepared for the group were forged documents, false work histories and tailor-made families with young children for fraudulent benefit claims. “The information we had was that once they had served their purpose they were going to be returned home,” said one police officer.

This time the group was turned back at the airport after immigration officials contacted antitrafficking police. However, new evidence shows the plundering of Britain’s benefit system by organised crime is a booming trade – and trafficked people, particularly children, are at the heart of it. An estimated £1 billion a year is defrauded from the benefits and tax credits system, with tens of millions of pounds lost to organised crime. While some fraud is inevitable, there is mounting concern about the high proportion of fraudulent claims orchestrated by traffickers which are being rubber-stamped after only the most basic checks.

Some of the suspects behind this fraud can be traced to Tandarei, a town of 15,000 people in eastern Romania which includes a 2,000-strong Roma gypsy population. Over the past five years, previously rundown neighbourhoods have inexplicably prospered. The minor economic boom has seen 100 imposing new homes built, valued at about £20m. BMWs and Land Rovers with British numberplates cruise the dusty streets. Vasile Sava, mayor of Tandarei, said last week: “How can I know where they get the money from? Nobody is telling us how they made the money abroad, legally or illegally.”

British police, who are said to have acquired several mug-shots of the affluent suspects in Tandarei, believe some of this new-found wealth is the proceeds of crime sent back from the UK, Spain and Italy using a variety of methods including Western Union and MoneyGram wire transfer services. The suspected source of the funding is threefold: trafficking, street crime and benefit fraud.

Under strict rules imposed when Romania and Bulgaria joined the European Union in January 2007, new arrivals to Britain from those countries are typically unable to claim benefits for themselves or their children. Claims can, however, be made by the self-employed who have National Insurance numbers and by those who have worked in the country for 12 months. The Romanian gangs use a variety of documents to prove adults are eligible for benefits – and then use the trafficked children in this country to boost the claims.

One of the methods is to create companies which are used to certify that an individual is providing services on a self-employed basis. This testimony is used to obtain a National Insurance number, which then provides access to the benefits system. Another method is to falsify immigration papers indicating that the claimant has been in the country for at least five years and has leave to remain, again getting access to the benefits system.

In theory, child benefit and tax credits for children can be claimed even if the children are not in the country. However, the presence of the trafficked child means extra housing benefit and additional tax credits, and helps if any spot checks are conducted by council officials or benefit investigators.

Many of the families who have had their claims rubber-stamped by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and HM Revenue & Customs have never worked in this country and are not entitled to benefits. Rudimentary checks on documents are partly blamed for the problem, along with the chaos that has bedevilled the tax credit system since its inception. The crime is relatively risk-free and relies on a simple formula: the more people the gang trafficks, the more benefits they get.

Superintendent Bernie Gravett heads Operation Golf, a 14-strong unit investigating trafficking, based at a north London police station and funded with a £1m EU grant. He said: “This is the exploitation of children for criminal gain. They take

control of the payment methods and the accounts into which the benefits are paid and a very small percentage occasionally goes to the actual claimants.”

The activities of the gang first came under the spotlight in 2007. The Metropolitan police began an investigation because of concern about the increase in crime involving Romanians after the country’s accession to the EU – more than 1,000 offences were recorded in the first six months of 2007, compared with 168 in the whole of 2006. In January 2008, police made well-publicised raids on 16 addresses used by the traffickers, discovering homes crammed with young children who had been trained in street crime. Four people were subsequently jailed at Reading crown court for child trafficking in the first conviction under the Immigration Act 2004.

Most of the suspected traffickers, however, were left untouched because of the difficulty of pursuing prosecutions for trafficking. Often the parents are complicit and children are unwilling to give evidence.

The Sunday Times last week spoke to one of the children who police believe was trafficked, but she insisted she went to the UK of her own accord. The 15-year-old girl said: “I went to England because I wanted to.” Undeterred, Operation Golf launched an offensive similar to that used to apprehend the Chicago gangster Al Capone, who was eventually jailed for tax evasion in the 1930s. Their aim was to disrupt any of the activities of the Romanian gang and pursue them for every possible offence. It is these tactics that have garnered the new evidence on trafficking for benefit fraud.

One arm of the gang is under investigation for providing forged documents linked to DWP claims worth £4.5m. DWP officials are understood to have identified about 500 suspect claims linked to the gang. In an operation in northeast London on August 11 involving Romanian officers and lawyers, police visited 24 addresses and identified 20 children believed to have been trafficked. They found individual backdated payments for benefits ranging from £14,000 to £24,000, with suspected fraudulent claims totalling £100,000.

Anthony Steen MP, chairman of the UK all-party parliamentary group on trafficking of women and children, who accompanied the police on the operation in Ilford, said: “Our benefits and legal system are not geared for this type of organised crime. The benefits system is being siphoned off by the traffickers using children who are appallingly exploited.”

Detective Inspector Gordon Valentine, head of Operation Paladin, the Metropolitan police’s specialist anti-child-trafficking team, said that while the Romanian gang was highly organised, there was evidence of traffickers from several other countries targeting the benefits system. In one of the few prosecutions to date, Peace Sandberg, a housing official in London, was jailed for 26 months last year for illegally bringing a child into the country. Sandberg paid more than £300 for a three-month-old baby from overseas so she could get priority housing.

The Home Office said it had a number of ways to target the trafficking, which it views as “a modern form of slavery”. This includes £4m of funding for a national referral mechanism to identify trafficking victims. However, HMRC and DWP now face questions about the effectiveness of their checks against organised crime and whether they have adequately assessed the potential threat. DWP said it had amended its system of allocating National Insurance numbers to “provide further safeguards”. HMRC said in a statement that it “takes fraud extremely seriously and has a range of checks in place throughout the period of the claim, including checking the authenticity of documents”. *[That it "takes xyz extremely seriously" is the cracked-record response of any British bureaucracy whenever their negligence gets publicized. It is complete bullsh*t]*

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uk visa said

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‘The Home Office said it had a number of ways to target the trafficking,’...

It seems a shame that none of them appear as effective as one would wish; then again effective