

CHILD SLAVES, STREET GANGS AND 'FAGIN-LIKE' STREET CRIME WORTH MILLIONS OF POUNDS A YEAR.

Tragedy of urchins groomed for crime rackets in Scotland

EXCLUSIVE

By **Ben Borland**

CHILD slaves smuggled into Scotland have sparked an epidemic of "Fagin-like" street crime worth millions of pounds a year.

The Sunday Express can reveal Roma gypsy gangsters are grooming youngsters for a life of pickpocketing, shoplifting and ATM theft.

Children, many of them aged under 10, are bought in Eastern Europe for about £20,000 and can make up to £75,000 a year for their ruthless mas-

ters. Senior politicians say hundreds of boys and girls are operating in cities including Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen.

Conservative MP Anthony Steen is lobbying Scottish Secretary Jim Murphy to take tough measures to end the

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Roman's tears as he carries best friend Stephen on his final journey

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PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL O'NEILL FOR NEWSWEEK



Roma crimelords traffic child gangs for street crimes

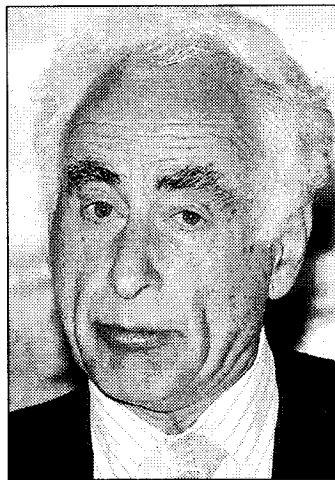
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"vicious activity run by extremely clever and very cruel gangs".

Speaking in the House of Commons, he said: "We have new slavery now both in Scotland and in England. We have thousands of eastern European children on the streets involved in criminal activity organised by trafficking gangs. They do not go to school.

"What are the Secretary of State and his counterparts doing to rid our streets of this Fagin-like situation? It is quite disgraceful and it needs to be dealt with."

Yesterday, Mr Steen, MP for Totnes, in Devon, said he is certain that Roma crime gangs from



CONCERNED: MP Anthony Steen and Minister Ann McKechnin

'Like the time of Dickens'

Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary operate across the country.

"There will be human trafficking in every large town in Scotland," he said. "You find it where you least expect it, either children sold into a life of crime, domestic slaves or women forced to work in the sex industry.

"I have no doubt that on the streets of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen there will be Roma children involved in pickpocket-

ing, shoplifting and ATM thefts.

"A really skillful child can earn up to £75,000 a year for a trafficker. It is like going back 150 years to the time of Dickens."

The Roma children are often sold by their families in order to pay off debts to the crimelords. Some are reported to be as young as four.

As many as 800,000 people are trafficked by criminal gangs every year, more than in the whole of the 250 years when slavery was legal.

In January, police in Slough, Berkshire, smashed a nationwide racket involving up to 200 child pickpockets and making an estimated £100million a year.

Last year, police raided brothels to free women who had been trafficked into Scotland for sex.

Scotland Office minister Ann McKechnin told the Commons last week that officials at Westminster and Holyrood had joined with Scottish police forces to tackle criminal networks across the whole of the UK.

Chris Beddoe, director of children's charity Epat UK, said campaigners are "concerned" by the exploitation of youngsters.

She added: "The money generated all goes back to the crime gangs in Romania.

"A number of different crimes are committed. One is small time theft but on a very, very large

scale. The children are groomed to go out and steal on the streets, a purse here and a handbag there doesn't sound much but in very high numbers it adds up to a very large amount of cash.

"Also tied in is benefit fraud, such as claiming housing benefit and child tax credits for multiple children. The majority are out of school and live far below the normal welfare standards.

"They live in multiple occupancy houses with people who are not their parents. That is not unusual in the Roma community but it leaves them at greater risk of harm. And once they have been remodelled and groomed to

'A skilful child earns £75,000'

this life of crime, it is very hard to break the cycle."

The Scottish Government yesterday insisted there is no evidence to suggest child trafficking is a large-scale problem.

A spokesman said: "This is borne out in findings from police operations and work by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, however Scottish police forces will continue to be vigilant and work with their UK counterparts to prevent any trafficking."