



## **COVID 19 AND IMPACT ON BLACK CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

### **Key Challenges In Protecting Child Victims of Trafficking During COVID 19 Pandemic**

**AFRUCA Briefing Paper 5: COVID 19 Series  
November 2020**

## **About AFRUCA**

AFRUCA – Safeguarding Children is a national charity with offices in London and Manchester working to address child protection issues in Black and minority communities in the UK. We provide prevention and early intervention services to address child abuse issues, working with families and communities. We also provide educational services, working with practitioners in different fields to improve their skills and enable better intervention in families.

Since the onset of COVID 19, AFRUCA has experienced increased referrals into our child protection early intervention services from local authorities across the country. This shows an increasing number of children referred into the care system due to a variety of safeguarding reasons.

Our Child Protection and Social Work service aims to help reduce the number of children from BME communities in the child protection and foster care system. We provide a tailor made, culturally appropriate, intensive one to one training and support service for parents in the child protection system. We work objectively with families, ensuring parents receive new skills so they can provide a positive home environment for their children, free from abuse, exploitation and harm.

AFRUCA also runs a Safeguarding Victims of Child Trafficking programme working with children, young people and families at risk of or who have experienced different forms of trafficking and exploitation. We provide a one-to-one practical and emotional well-being support for young people as well as access to therapeutic support to enable young people recover from their experiences.

AFRUCA has developed a set of briefing documents to help draw attention to the range of child protection issues exacerbated by COVID and the impact on children in Black and other minority communities.

This short briefing paper explores some of the key issues affecting the protection of children during COVID 19 lockdown, with instances drawn from community intelligence, AFRUCA's work, media reports and other sources.

A version of this paper was presented to the Trafficking Law and Policy Forum on 26 November 2020.

## **Introduction**

Child trafficking is a global problem involving the movement of a child for the purpose of exploitation. Due to their age, children are deemed not have the capacity to give their consent to be trafficked.

The Modern Slavery Act of 2015 is a UK Act of Parliament designed to tackle slavery and human trafficking through the consolidation of previous legislation and the introduction of new measures.

In the UK today, there are children who are trafficked externally into the country to be abused and exploited in different ways. The UK also has a problem of internal trafficking, especially county lines trafficking in which children are trafficked and exploited as drug mules, to sell drugs or move around money involved in the sale of drugs. The UK National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the government system established to identify victims of trafficking and modern slavery. In 2019, the NRM identified over 4550 child victims of modern slavery and trafficking in the UK with victims coming from countries like Eritrea, Sudan, Nigeria, Iran, Afghanistan, Albania and Romania.

Most child victims (52%) identified by the NRM are British Nationals and these are usually cases of county lines trafficking, criminal exploitation or sexual exploitation. Both girls and boys are at risk of trafficking and different forms of exploitation. There are anecdotal reports that most victims of county lines trafficking are children from Black and Minority ethnic backgrounds due to a variety of reasons, including families' economic situation, family dysfunctionality and the presence of other forms of child abuse and neglect. Unfortunately, NRM figures for British nationals are not broken down by ethnicity so there is no way of ascertaining these claims. However, it is a known fact that BME communities are disproportionately impacted by COVID 19 socially, economically and health-wise. This also suggests that children in these communities might be at higher risks of child trafficking and exploitation during COVID and the lockdown.

## **2. Key Issues Affecting Victims/Survivors During COVID**

- COVID has helped to facilitate demand for key forms of child exploitation especially those "home based" or online. Surge in online child sexual exploitation, social media as a mode of recruitment, domestic slavery, as traffickers adapt their modus operandi in line with COVID/lock-down.
- School closures, poverty, reduced access to services (social services, food banks, charities) are making children a lot more vulnerable to exploitation.
- Children living in homes where parents have lost their jobs and have little or no recourse to public funds, hence living in poverty, are vulnerable to grooming and exploitation by traffickers – both online and offline.
- The lock-down has significantly reduced availability of help or support and escape routes for victims, prolonging the experiences of trafficking and exploitation for many.
- COVID has also made victims more isolated and less able to access help and support with less opportunities for rescue and protection.
- The first quarter of 2020 showed the highest number of children referred into the NRM since records began. This could mean that a lot more are exposed to risks of trafficking because of COVID.
- Exacerbation of young people's mental health due to confinement within their living spaces. For some young people, this situation is a stark reminder of their experiences of being locked up by their traffickers.
- The uncertainty caused by COVID and the lockdown compounds victims' level of anxiety due to the prolonged delays in processing their immigration and asylum cases.
- Closure of foodbanks and other support services meant many victims were unable to access additional support as before, leading to reduced access to food.
- The payment card issued to victims living in government funded shelters and other provisions also meant cultural and religious dietary requirements could not be met as these cards could not be used in food outlets that stored such special foods.
- There are reports of children going missing from foster care, raising the risks of re-trafficking and further exposure to exploitation and harm.
- Perhaps the survivors of trafficking worst affected were those no longer in the system because their immigration status had been established. However, with no recourse to public funds, some were unable to meet the costs of living due

to lack of income. One AFRUCA service user was unable to pay her rent and bills as her place of work had closed down due to the pandemic.

### **3. Government Action Compounding The Experiences of Victims**

Many anti-trafficking experts believe there are some government policies that may have compounded the situation for child victims of trafficking:

- The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulation 2020 (SI/445/2020) provided key practitioners working with children with the flexibility to deliver their statutory duties towards children during the lock-down. Experts like ECPAT UK have highlighted how this new legislation effectively put child victims of trafficking at risk of harm in many ways.
- There are ongoing concerns about the criminalisation by law enforcement agencies of children forced to engage in criminal activities as part of their exploitation. It appears that statutory defence safeguards put in place under Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act are not being adhered to. Some police officers complain about the lack of clarity whether children engaging in criminal activities are victims or perpetrators. For this reason, charities have called for the statutory defence clause to be strengthened to meet international standards on non-prosecution of victims.
- There are calls to reform the National Referral Mechanism as there doesn't seem to be any clear, additional benefits for children who are referred into the system. As a result, there are plans to devolve NRM decision-making for child victims of trafficking to local authorities and consultation is ongoing with charities and other stakeholders on how this would work in practice.
- There are concerns that the Independent Child Trafficking Guardian scheme still does not cover all parts of England. This means that many child victims of trafficking are excluded from this vital support that would have really helped to amplify their voices, ensuring they receive the right services that best meet their needs.
- There are concerns about the lack of engagement with the BME children's sector as key stakeholders in child trafficking policy-making. This limits opportunities to inform government policy and input specialist knowledge and intelligence in anti-trafficking work.

#### **4. Supporting Child Victims of Trafficking During COVID**

- It is important to increase online education and community awareness to reach parents, carers and young people about dangers/risks of online child trafficking especially during COVID so parents are better aware of how to provide safeguards for children
- Many families are isolated and going through hardship. Children in such families are potentially at risk of grooming by trafficking gangs. Efforts are required to engage in more family support including the provision of emotional well-being support, help with accessing finance and benefits, help with access to food and other facilities to ensure the family unit is safe and can provide safety for the children.
- Vulnerable families require one-to-one parenting programmes to educate parents about risks of human trafficking and how to protect their children.
- Agencies should invest in comprehensive training courses for their staff to improve ability to identify victims of child trafficking and intervene appropriately.
- Mental health provisions for child victims to address trafficking experience compounded by COVID, although services were in short supply before the pandemic. More services are required to ensure children have access to the right therapeutic support before it is too late. We hope to have our mental health service back in place to address demand as a result of COVID Wave 2.
- Existing structures like BASNET should be engaged to help inform the policy making process about BME issues to enlighten policy-makers about various intersections that impact on the trafficking and exploitation of BME children.
- Referrals to AFRUCA Child Protection Service can be made via our website at [www.afruca.org](http://www.afruca.org).

#### **5. References**

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**Author: Debbie Ariyo**

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