

The image shows the interior of a van with its double doors open, parked on a street at night. The interior is dimly lit with a blueish light, revealing a front seat, a rear bench seat, and a window with curtains. The exterior is illuminated by a warm yellow street light, showing the brickwork of a building and a window on the right side. The van's interior is mostly empty, with some items on the seats.

The road to nowhere

Every year, hundreds of children are smuggled into Britain in vans like this, and end up in foster homes – only to disappear. Caroline Scott and George Arbuthnott investigate



One Friday evening this autumn, Anh Thi Minh, a small, shy Vietnamese teenager, ate supper with her foster family at their home in Ringwood, in Hampshire, and went to bed early. Theirs was a happy home, right on the edge of the New Forest. Anh had only been with the family for a few months, and though she spoke little English, she had been adjusting as well as could be expected to her new life, thousands of miles away from her real family, whom she had left behind in a remote village in Vietnam to find work in the West. When her foster mother put her head around Anh's bedroom door at 4am, Anh was sleeping soundly. But at some point between then and 10.30 that morning, Anh disappeared. She had no more than a few pounds in her pocket and no mobile phone. The only things she took with her were a gold bangle and a soft, pink woolly hat with a bow that she loved and wore constantly.

Anh's foster carers and the police had no way of knowing where she had gone, but they knew from experience what had happened to her: she was back in the hands of the criminal gang who first smuggled her into Britain. Her tragic story will resonate with police forces, child protection officials and social services departments across the country; Anh, in common with many hundreds of "invisible" children from Southeast Asia, Africa and elsewhere, had been trafficked by a criminal gang, forced into prostitution, rescued by the British care system and, when the moment was right, abducted again.

Anh had described leaving rural north Vietnam with other girls and women, being stashed away in a car on top of a transporter

lorry and driven through China into Russia, then into Hungary, across Europe to France. There, she was raped and subjected to serious sexual assaults, which served both as a way of breaking her down psychologically and getting her ready for a life of prostitution in the West. She was warned that if she tried to escape, her family back in Vietnam would be harmed. The psychological pressure she must have been under is unimaginable. Her foster mum says that every day she had with Anh felt like a day spent building up trust and making her stronger, but she was constantly frightened and on edge. Ultimately, it seems the pressure was too great, and she vanished.

In the course of our investigation, we have established that traffickers and modern-day slavemasters have gained a forensic knowledge of Britain's child-protection system and are working it cynically, using foster care and children's homes as taxpayer-funded incubators until they are ready to put their victims to work, or sell them on.

When we launched our campaign to highlight the plight of Britain's secret slaves in August, revealing the scandal of the trafficking victims working in Britain's nail bars, it had a huge impact. The following week the home secretary, Theresa May, announced plans for a Modern Slavery Bill, the contents of which will be revealed in the Queen's Speech in May. Every area we have investigated since — domestic slavery, cannabis factories, the use of Nigerian Juju to trap girls in se — has revealed children trapped in forced labour and often sexual exploitation in an attempt to pay back money "borrowed" from their traffickers for the cost of their passage to Britain.

According to the National Crime Agency's UK Human Trafficking Centre, 549 children were identified as potential victims of human

trafficking last year, 70 under the age of nine. More child victims came from Vietnam (103), and Nigeria (78), than anywhere else. But these official figures belie the true scale of the problem. In 2005, a Metropolitan Police operation detected 1,800 unaccompanied children entering the country via Heathrow over three months; 600 of them were deemed vulnerable and nearly half of them were under the age of 11. You don't have to be a detective to conclude that the "uncles" and "aunts" they believe they are meeting on the other side of the customs hall are not relatives at all.

Many of these victims eventually find their way into local authority care from where, according to a parliamentary report in 2009 three out of five simply disappear. Since then, the authorities have stopped bothering to count. A parliamentary inquiry into why this happened, and the astonishing lack of data on human trafficking in general, finished gathering evidence last month and is due to publish its findings in the new year.

It is the scarcity of information and the extraordinary absence of culpability that is so striking. In 2011, 25 children, aged 12 to 17 disappeared from local authority care in Kent without anyone, apparently, knowing what happened to them. Last year, Kent social services lost 18. How could this possibly be allowed to happen?

"It is always a huge concern when children and young people go missing," Jenny Whittle, Kent County Council's children's services specialist, told us. "In Kent, we face particular issues due to the ports in the county and we receive the highest number of unaccompanied minors in the UK. We don't know what sort of ordeals they have gone through on their journey. They are scared and many have been told by traffickers to run away and meet

contacts when they arrive in England." She points the finger firmly back at the government. "When a child goes missing, we work closely with the police to find the child, but we also need the government and other authorities to help us to address these wider issues, including breaking down international trafficking networks."

Maggie Blyth, independent chair of Kent Safeguarding Children's Board is skilled at talking up "multi-agency partnerships"; at a recent hearing to gather evidence for the parliamentary inquiry, she suggested that police, health and social workers should be encouraged to work together to keep children safe — a solution so blindingly obvious, most people would question why they're not doing it in the first place. "Do you think you could make looking through the lens of trafficking part of your work?" asked the inquiry co-chairman Baroness Butler-Sloss, pointing out sharply that if 18 babies disappeared from a hospital in Kent there would be a public outcry.

Christine Beddoe, a child protection specialist who coordinated the parliamentary inquiry into the missing data, believes child victims rescued from the clutches of criminal gangs have up to an 80% chance of being re-trafficked while in local authority care. A report commissioned by MPs last year found most trafficked children go missing within the first week of being in care — some within 48 hours — and almost two-thirds are never found.

Fleet Services on the M3 is a popular spot for families on their way to the New Forest and Dorset to stop and take a break. It is also a regular drop-off and pick-up point for trafficked Vietnamese children, fresh off the ferries from France. Invisible among the

crowds dipping into Waitrose and Starbucks, they change hands quickly and from here are rerouted to Birmingham, Manchester and Bristol. Some are orphans, sold into slavery; others have been handed over by desperate parents who believe the sacrifice of one child will benefit the whole family. The West, they believe, will deliver education, jobs and opportunities. It's a dream that turns to dust almost as soon as the children, some as young as nine, start the journey.

Transported by boat to China, then packed into lorries for the journey through Russia and into Europe, boys and girls alike are brutalised en route. Girls, destined to work in prostitution are often raped repeatedly; boys who are to be used as lone gardeners in cannabis factories in cities across Britain are beaten and starved. Traffickers who have gone to the effort and expense of getting them here make certain they won't attempt to escape by also threatening violence to their families back home.

Philip Ishola is the former chair of the London Safeguarding Children Board. He told us about Mai. It was the custom in Mai's community, a farming village on Vietnam's northern border with China, for the oldest child from each family to travel to a more affluent country, find a job and send money home. So when Mai was 14, her parents arranged for her to travel to Europe to work in a nail salon.

A middle-aged man, whom Mai called "uncle", escorted her by road to Thailand and then by plane to Eastern Europe and on to France by truck. There she was passed to another Vietnamese man, in his twenties, named An Dung. He would turn out to be what the victims refer to as a "lover boy": when Dung demanded sex, Mai acquiesced, believing he would protect her. Dung told her that French border staff were on their tails and they must

flee to England; to raise money for the ferry ticket, she needed to have sex with other men. Ashamed but trapped, Mai was barred from contacting her family and believed she'd be arrested if she escaped. Soon, she and three other Vietnamese girls were servicing numerous men a day.

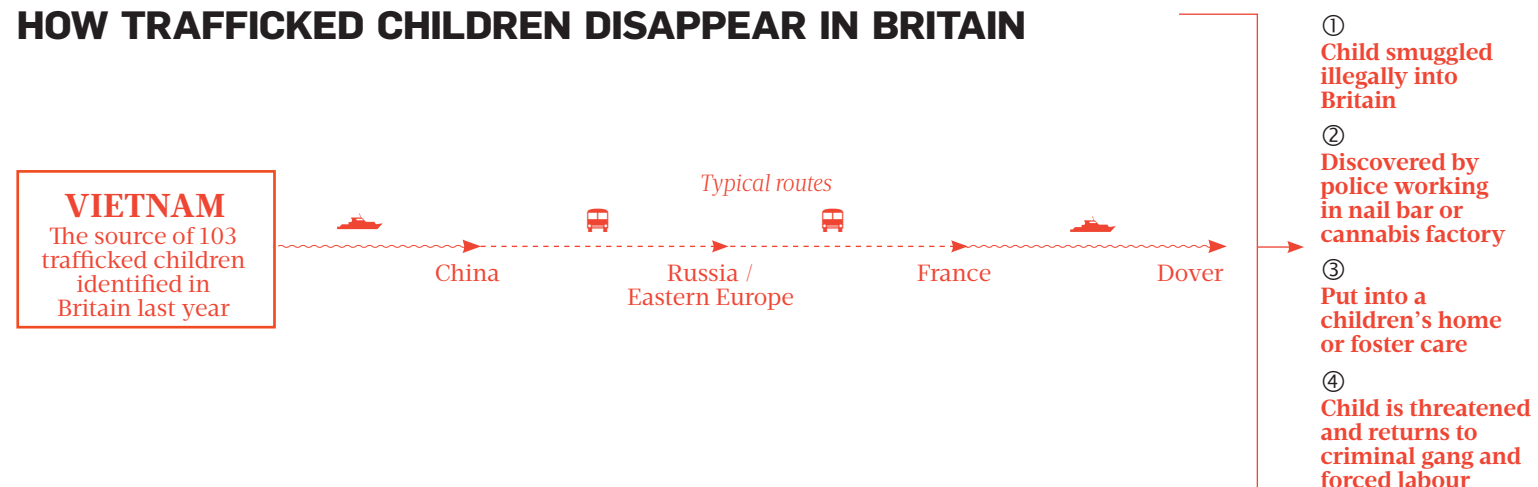
The trafficking network that "owned" Mai operated nine nail salons across mainland Europe and Britain, all fronts for brothels. After six months in France, she was taken to the Midlands and on to premises in London. When Mai became pregnant, she was no longer any use to Dung and he told her to present herself to a police station, from where she was sent to a children's home. From its windows, Mai could see Dung, prowling the street outside, reminding her there was no escape.

Mai gave birth to her baby, a girl, in hospital with a social worker beside her. But outside, Dung and a female trafficker, disguised as a man, were already approaching. In the time it took the social worker to visit the lavatory, Mai was gone, leaving her baby behind.

Mai was lucky: police raided local brothels, found her and reunited her with her baby. Both are now safe and well and living with specialist foster carers in the north of England. But victims like Mai cross the Channel constantly via Eurotunnel or ferry, zipped into bags, hidden in crates and containers or stowed in secret compartments. And those who are discovered by border officials are not always offered help. Last year, an investigation by the UK's children's commissioner revealed that traumatised trafficked children arriving at Dover, Southampton and Newhaven were sent straight back to France under a secret "gentleman agreement" in force since 1995.

Victims, often distressed or unwell, were detained and subjected to immediate ➡➡➡➡

HOW TRAFFICKED CHILDREN DISAPPEAR IN BRITAIN



in-depth interviews and allowed no contact with social services or child protection staff. They were then dispatched back to France within 24 hours if they did not immediately apply for asylum. Some did not even know which country they were in, and their fate in Europe is unknown.

Andy Desmond, a detective with Scotland Yard's Human Exploitation and Organised Crime Command until he retired last year, was one of the first policemen to recognise that traffickers were breaching care homes. He says local authority care often acts as no more than a holding pen for trafficked children.

In 2010, Desmond began investigating a Nigerian national, Anthony Harrison, who was suspected of trafficking two Nigerian girls, aged 14 and 16, into Britain to force them into prostitution. Desmond discovered that Harrison was flying his victims into Heathrow and instructing them to claim asylum, knowing they would immediately be transferred to a children's home in the London Borough of Hillingdon, where he could leave them until he found a pimp willing to purchase them. The girls had SIM cards hidden in their hair pieces and Desmond was able to prove that Harrison had phoned them from a car parked outside the children's home.

Between 2006 and 2009, 77 trafficked Chinese children went missing from a single children's home in Hillingdon. In the outcry that followed, the borough set up a 24/7 response service, with a social worker permanently on call, combined with a fortnightly multi-agency meeting to discuss the risks and needs of children arriving at Heathrow. The council says these measures helped reduce the number of children who went missing to four between 2011 and 2012. Paul Hewitt, head of Hillingdon's Safeguarding Children Board, says this model needs to be rolled out at every train station, port and airport. "I know from colleagues in Bristol, Belfast and Stanstead that the problem hasn't been solved," he says. "Children are valuable commodities — traffickers have just moved on to places where they'll meet the least resistance."

Anthony Harrison was part of a family who flew another 40 girls into Britain via Gatwick, picking them up outside a children's home in Surrey. He was sentenced to 20 years in jail in 2011, but other networks continue to thrive and traffickers constantly change their routes. Desmond believes girls are now being flown

into Bristol and Manchester, but he says that new policing priorities combined with funding cuts mean there may never be another conviction like Harrison's. "It seems to me the situation is going backwards," he warns. "Because the expertise is not being passed on."

The organisation responsible for

coordinating the response to missing trafficked children, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (Ceop), stopped providing an official count of the numbers in 2010. When The Sunday Times repeatedly asked them why, Charlie Hedges, Ceop's manager for missing, abducted and kidnapped children, said it will

investigate how to restart the assessment.

Hedges also pledged to propose to the Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo) that every police force in the land is issued, for the first time, with official guidance on identifying and supporting trafficked children.

Christine Beddoe, the child protection expert who coordinated the parliamentary inquiry into the missing data, confirmed the report will state there was "a responsibility vacuum", because Ceop's senior management were focusing on "other priorities".

But none of this will make any difference unless we find a way of keeping children safe. There is currently no statutory safety and protection standard across the UK for trafficked children, and a complete lack of appropriate accommodation. An acute national shortage of foster carers — 9,000 more are needed to avert a crisis this year — means trafficked children are frequently placed alone in cheap hotels and B&Bs, from where they promptly disappear. Astonishingly, this is standard practice.

All the research available suggests that the best solution to help trafficked children break the vicious cycle is specialist foster carers, trained to identify and respond to their specific needs, and know how to keep them safe. In fact, providing such specialist care is obligatory under European guidelines.

Three years ago, the government awarded Barnardo's £1.4m to pilot the Safe Accommodation Project: foster carers were trained to spot the smallest detail that would alert them to a child in danger. They removed phones and internet access, and

1 WEEK
*The time it takes for
most trafficked
children in care to go
missing*

children didn't go out alone. The number of times children went missing was reduced by half. Run on a shoestring budget and stretched across three regional centres — Portsmouth, London and Manchester — Barnardo's has worked with 222 trafficked children over the past five years. In Hampshire alone, 23 are still missing. "To me, it's as if 23 children have died," said Barnardo's Portsmouth services manager Lynne Chitty. "Because we will never find them."

Lai, one of the little girls Chitty is currently supporting, was trafficked to Britain by the same organised gang who murdered her mother. Lai believes if she is sent back to Vietnam with her debt unpaid, she will be killed too. Would the Home Office send an unaccompanied minor with this chilling backstory back to the country she was trafficked from? Chitty, who has seen this scenario play out many times before, says it would. "And they end up straight back in the hands of traffickers."

Rachel and her husband, David, an engineer, trained with Barnardo's as specialist foster carers. There are locks on the windows of their bungalow in a well-maintained cul-de-sac in Northampton, and the doors are double-locked. Inside, it is extraordinarily warm and tranquil. Their last specialist foster placement, a trafficked Vietnamese boy who arrived when he was 15 has just moved on, aged 18, to live independently. Rachel, now waiting for the next child to arrive, is concerned that, although she has a bedroom ready, she will not get a referral. Local authorities either don't know about the service, or are reluctant to label unaccompanied children as trafficked — it's much cheaper in the short term to put them in a B&B than pay around £500 a week for a specialist placement.

Yet the rewards of specialist care are plain to see. Over the past three years, Pat and Steve, who live in the Midlands, have looked after six young people from Vietnam, Africa and Afghanistan. Linh, a Vietnamese girl who had been working in the sex industry since she was

14, and has just moved away to college, still calls them Mum and Dad.

Pat is in no doubt how close they came to losing her. "One day, I found a dozen phone numbers sewn into the seams of her jeans. If I hadn't been trained to spot that kind of thing, Linh ►►►

549
*children were
identified as
potential victims of
human trafficking
in the UK last year*

would have spent the rest of her childhood in a brothel.” Pat is constantly astounded at Linh’s resilience. “These kids amaze us,” she says. “How they walk around smiling after all they’ve been through is something very special to see.”

Theresa May has charged the Labour MP Frank Field with drafting the new Modern Slavery Bill and he told us that he will propose longer sentences for child traffickers. Field has also pledged to consider increasing the number of specialist foster carers in each region of the UK, as part of a wider recruitment drive.

In Hampshire, a major incident room with half a dozen detectives was set up over the disappearance of Anh Thi Minh. Leads were obtained from the local Vietnamese community and five people were arrested in connection with Thi’s disappearance. “We made a great deal of noise within a very closed community and kicked in a number of doors to find this girl,” says DS Will Whale who led the operation. Whale’s “reasonably blunt” police activity resulted in a few people coming forward

1,800
The number of unaccompanied children who arrived at Heathrow over three months in 2005

wanting to help, and the leads they provided took the team to Bristol.

At around 2pm on Saturday, November 15, a female detective in plain clothes entered

Bella Nails, a beauty salon in the Southmead area of Bristol, and asked the young girl behind the counter for prices. The girl, still wearing her favourite soft, pink hat with the bow, and a distinctive gold bangle, was Anh Thi Minh.

Thi had been working in the salon and living with another young girl in an airless room at the back. Even so, she was not pleased to be found. “She was really, really angry,” says Whale. “She’s a nice, polite girl but she did everything to prevent me from taking her away. We had no idea what we were facing.” Did it cross your mind that it might be better to leave her in that situation? Whale’s answer is unexpectedly poignant.

“These girls are comprehensively brainwashed — what they think is good and right is not actually good and right for them — and if she’s angry with me, I can live with that. My hope is that with adult care and education, she will begin to realise that the

people around her are exploiting her, not caring for her.”

Whale describes the feeling of finding Anh as a mixture of elation and total sadness. “Drug dealers, gun runners, murderers, people who do terrible things, I can cope with, but every time we smashed down a door, we found not perpetrators, but terrified victims, existing rather than living.”

Before she arrived in Britain, Anh had been given a contraceptive injection. On the desk in front of her in the Bristol nail bar were notes scrawled with English phrases — sexualised comments she’d been given to learn — clear indicators she was destined for sexual exploitation. She is now being looked after at a location we can’t divulge. But Whale is concerned that it will prove impossible to keep her safe. “I worry that if she goes missing again, the perpetrators will drive her into a brothel underground,” he says. “And if that happens, we will never find her.” ■

The names of Anh Thi Minh and all child trafficking victims have been changed to protect their identities. The names of foster parents have also been changed

If you suspect trafficked children are being held or put to work in your area, contact Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111

ALWAYS WATCHING Once in Britain, trafficked children remain enslaved to the men who brought them here

