



Immigration and asylum

China-UK people trafficking often driven by debt, experts say

Many victims travel to UK to pay off gambling arrears and end up in further debt bondage

● **Essex lorry deaths: all 39 victims were Chinese**

Your privacy

We use cookies to improve your experience on our site and to show you personalised advertising. To find out more, read our [privacy policy](#) and [cookie policy](#).



I'm OK with that

[My options](#)

down hard on the “perpetrators and kingpins of these type of criminalities” and bring them to justice.

“We are deeply shocked and saddened by the loss of the 39 people, believed to be of Chinese origins, who perished in the tragic incident in Essex,” Yeo said. “We ask the government to do all it can to ensure a tragedy like this never happens again.”

Lorry horror highlights risks migrants take to try to reach UK

[→ Read more](#)

Sulaiha Ali, of Duncan Lewis Solicitors, said many of the Chinese nationals she represented were victims of trafficking, having travelled to the UK to pay off gambling debts they had no prospect of clearing if they remained in China. In some cases, a man might send his wife to the UK to work to pay off his debt.

According to Ali, those who owed money in China could be under extreme pressure from loan sharks, who might organise their travel to the UK. Others approached agents to arrange their travel, which could cost between £7,000 and £14,000.

Ali said many of her clients had travelled to the UK by plane rather than lorry, and once in the UK they were forced into debt bondage, whereby all the money they earned was taken from them to pay off their debt.

“They may be picked up at the airport here and then taken straight to a brothel or restaurant where they are forced to work,” she said. “Traffickers exploit them ... They are often very fearful and distrustful of authority. Indicators of trafficking may be ignored by the Home Office and they end up in detention centres. Many are very traumatised.”

The government’s 2018 [annual report](#) on modern slavery identified China as the fourth most common country from which potential victims of slavery were identified.

The charity [Women for Refugee Women](#) examined the cases of 14 Chinese victims of trafficking who were detained in Yarl’s Wood and found that some were taken straight from [immigration raids on brothels](#) and massage parlours to detention, despite clear indications they had been sexually exploited.

The [research](#) found that most were brought to the UK to pay off a debt and then forced into domestic or sexual slavery. It accused the Home Office of breaching its own policy to not detain vulnerable victims of trafficking.

According to Home Office data, Chinese women made up the largest group of those held in Yarl’s Wood detention centre, in Bedfordshire, last year, with 420 detainees.

Ali said: “China is a major source for men, women and children who are lured to the UK and other European destinations on the promise of a legitimate job, only to be subjected to forced labour or sex work on arrival. These are people with genuine protection needs and there needs to be recognition that they are forced to make these desperate choices because their lives are at risk in their home country.”

Although China is believed to be a major source of both victims of human trafficking as well as traffickers, little is known about the activity. There are few Chinese non-governmental organisations working on the issue and some critics say the Chinese government has shown little appetite for addressing the problem.

According to Europol, between 2015 and 2016 China was among the top five non-EU countries of registered victims of human trafficking in the EU and the top source for suspected traffickers.

“We see a huge population being trafficked into this country, especially the Chinese, but there is not much help and support being provided,” said Tian Ma, a research fellow at Utrecht University whose studies focus on Chinese victims of trafficking.

In the early 1990s and early 2000s “snakeheads”, or organised crime groups from Fujian or Zhejiang province, established people-smuggling routes to western Europe through the Middle East, eastern Europe and in some cases Africa and South America, according to migration experts.

Smugglers lured customers with offers of work, and money would be paid to them upfront or over time as a debt paid off through work in the destination country. Then in the late 2000s, observers believed illegal migration from China was in decline, with the majority of cases being visa overstays.

“It’s obviously shocking that these deaths happened,” said Nicola Macbean, the founder of The Rights Practice, who focuses on human rights in Asia. “Also, just having thought the Chinese weren’t coming in that way and that they weren’t the group that were the most vulnerable.”

Immigrants have historically come from Fujian, a coastal province in the south, but experts have also noted more Chinese from other parts of the country like the former rustbelt in the north-east.

Olivia Iannelli, a research analyst at Trilateral Research, which works on human trafficking, said: “These individuals could have been irregular migrants who are often vulnerable and targeted by human traffickers. They were possibly making their way to the UK in search of a better life or fleeing persecution.” I.

“If these were victims of human trafficking, this clearly shows that we are really so far from understanding the problem and working with countries to better understand the root causes within individual countries and people at risk, such as the Chinese community.”

Topics

Immigration and asylum

Human trafficking / Human rights / China / news



Most popular

Across The Guardian	in UK news
1	Live / Brexit: Corbyn says Johnson must come to parliament to rule out no deal - live news
2	EU set to put Brexit delay on hold after Johnson's ultimatum
3	Rory Stewart calls three London men filmed in walkabout video 'minor gangsters'
4	Rees-Mogg breaks broken news to a horrified house John Crace
5	'Freddy Krueger in the room': women confront Harvey Weinstein at New York event
6	I watched Fox News every day for 44 months - here's what I learned
7	Why do people hate vegans?
8	Essex lorry victims were trapped before reaching Belgian coast, officials say
9	Barclays profits plunge as bank warns of challenging year ahead
10	Wary Tories say Johnson's election gamble could be seen as a stunt

UK ► UK politics Education Media Society Law Scotland Wales Northern Ireland

News **Opinion** Sport Culture Lifestyle