

High levels of mental illness reported by victims of human trafficking in the UK

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New research reveals the severe mental health problems experienced by men and women trafficked to the UK for sexual exploitation, domestic servitude and forced labour, including high levels of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The study, led by King's College London and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, found that of 150 people trafficked to the UK from more than 30 different countries, nearly 80 per cent of [women](#) and 40 per cent of men reported high levels of [depression](#), [anxiety](#) or PTSD.

Human trafficking is the recruitment and movement of people, by deception and coercion, for the purposes of exploitation. The UK Home Office has estimated that in 2013 there were between 10,000 and 13,000 trafficked people in the UK, including people trafficked for forced sex work, domestic servitude, and [labour](#) exploitation. Recent estimates suggest that almost 21 million people worldwide are in situations of forced labour as a result of [human trafficking](#).

Previous research has focused on trafficking in low and middle-income countries, whereas this study - published today in the *American Journal of Public Health (AJPH)* - is the first in a high-income setting to investigate the serious abuses experienced by trafficked men and women and the severe [mental health](#) impact experienced by survivors.

The researchers coordinated with a range of post-trafficking support

services across the UK, including voluntary organisations, hospitals and local authorities. Interviews were carried out between June 2013 and December 2014 with survivors of trafficking who were in contact with these services.

The study found that women were most often trafficked for [sexual exploitation](#) or domestic servitude, and nearly 80 per cent of them reported high levels of depression, anxiety or PTSD 16 months (on average) after escaping trafficking.

Over four-fifths of men were trafficked for labour exploitation, working in agriculture, construction and car washing, and 40 per cent of them reported high levels of depression, anxiety or PTSD.

Forced sex while trafficked was reported by 66 per cent of women, including over half of those trafficked for domestic servitude, indicating that even women who were not trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation were still being forced to have sex.

Dr Siân Oram, lead author of the study from the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN) at King's College London, said: 'Although it is very difficult to estimate the true scale of human trafficking, we know that it is a huge, global problem.

'Even after escaping trafficking, the large majority of people in our sample reported that they were still afraid of their traffickers. It is crucial, therefore, that the immediate safety of survivors is taken into consideration when planning the type of support required.'

Dr Oram added: 'Because of the clear evidence that human trafficking has devastating and long-lasting effects on mental health, there is an urgent need for evidence on the effectiveness of psychological therapies and treatments to support this highly vulnerable population.'

Dr Cathy Zimmerman, study co-investigator from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said: 'The key message of our findings is quite simple: human trafficking or modern slavery is a crime that does not discriminate. It damages the physical and psychological health of men and women exploited in many different labour sectors. The NHS has a key role to play in helping trafficked people to recover from their ordeal, and in the UK response to human trafficking.'

Provided by King's College London

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