

Migrant children in the UK are going missing from care—here's how to protect them

March 1 2023, by Patricia Hynes



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Separated children who [arrive alone in the UK](#) are being placed in hotels by the Home Office—and many of them are then [going missing](#).

On January 24 2023, the immigration minister announced that [200 unaccompanied children](#) were missing from UK hotels. These children

are at significant risk of [trafficking and exploitation](#). To stop this happening, those involved in these children's care should treat them like the children they are—and listen to what they need to feel safe.

Trafficking refers to when somebody has control of a child and moves, exchanges or transports them specifically to exploit them. They may be exploited before they reached the UK or upon arrival, and in a multitude of ways.

They may be forced to perform labor, or they might be sexually exploited. They might be placed in domestic servitude, as Olympian [Mo Farah](#) was when he first arrived in the UK. Children may be used to grow or carry drugs. Sometimes there are multiple forms of exploitation happening at the same time.

Lack of protection

Children who arrive in the UK should be safeguarded through the existing child protection system, not through parallel systems established outside existing protection processes. Placing children in unregulated hotels removes essential oversight and safeguarding of these children. This "temporary" practice has been going on [since July 2021](#).

Trafficked children are one of the groups most at risk of going missing in the UK. [Nearly one-third](#) of children who were identified or suspected of being trafficked went missing from local authority care in 2020—378 children. We have also known for years that children who go missing from care are [at risk of exploitation](#).

In a 2009 report, colleagues and I found that children and [young people](#) often went missing when they arrived in the country and again after entering local authority care. We [made a series of clear recommendations around this](#). Reports from [2016](#) and [2022](#) also

document children going missing from local authority care.

Helping these children starts with making them feel safe, so that they are comfortable telling people that they are victims of abuse or exploitation—and this can take time. But a key problem for children who arrive in the UK for the purposes of trafficking is that their needs are often ignored. Their cases are looked at as [immigration](#) or [criminal justice](#) cases rather than through a child protection lens.

Feeling safe

I recently conducted research in partnership with children's rights charity [ECPAT UK](#). We worked with 31 young people in England and Scotland who had been trafficked into the UK. [We asked them](#) what would improve their lives, now and in the future.

The young people told us that the systems and processes they found themselves in when they arrived in the UK were obstacles to reaching [positive outcomes](#). These included the lack of a secure immigration status and the experience of waiting for legal papers over long periods. One young person awaiting a decision said, "I don't have paper. Not free. Still in prison."

Some had experienced discrimination, or were not believed by professionals. One young person said, "I used to go every single day to the social work office and talking to ... the manager of the social workers. That's what he told me, 'Why don't you go back to your country?' That's what he say."

The young people told us that they wanted to feel safe. They said that physical safety would come from having [a safe home](#) and place to live, such as having accommodation appropriate for their age or with trained foster caregivers: certainly not being alone in a hotel. As one young

person said, "Protection for every young people from outside the UK is the first thing needed. Protection could be making him safe, for example, where to sleep and stay, and to get education ... healthcare ... friendships, I mean for protection."

We found that young people with [independent guardians](#)—designated people who provide regular support to children who have been trafficked—felt listened to and heard, leading to this feeling of safety.

We also found that to improve the lives of these young people, the approach taken by the government and social care must be centered around the child, with an understanding of what they may have been through in the past. Children have rights—to be heard, to participate, to be able to develop their lives and make contributions to society. These principles should inform the work of professionals they meet. As another young person said, These young people, theyre going to be someone in the future and theyre going to give back all that help that they got from this government and its very important for young people and support workers to know all of this.

For the first time, we know what young people would need to see for positive changes to happen in their lives. We have used this research to develop a "[Positive Outcomes Framework](#)". This includes 25 outcomes for the young person, such as "I can achieve and have dreams" or "I feel safe".

The [framework](#) also includes 86 indicators which describe how these aims can be achieved. These include, for instance, "Young people can undertake [vocational training](#) and English classes simultaneously" or "Children report knowing where to go when they don't feel safe and who to turn to".

These young people should be seen as the young people and children that

they are, and treated equally to other [children](#) in the UK. Our next step is to consider how this framework can be used in practice. This is difficult and complex territory but, if we are serious about the safety and well-being of these young people, recognizing their rights and needs is a vital first step.

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