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Researcher urges support for human trafficking victims

A Murdoch University graduate student and activist is looking at ways to improve support for victims of human trafficking in Australia.

While the exploitation of illegal workers is often linked to the sex industry, recent reports from the Attorney-General's Department and Australian Institute of Criminology have suggested it is on the rise in other industries.

Murdoch School of Law PhD candidate Brianna Lee said these include reports of abuse in construction, hospitality, agriculture, mining and manufacturing.

"Because of the nature of this crime, generating reliable statistics is almost impossible – not just in Australia, but worldwide, where it is regarded as the fastest growing form of organised crime," Ms Lee said.

"Many victims come from countries with police and government corruption, so there's fear and distrust of authority, which gets exploited by traffickers. You have to remember most of these people speak very little English and have no understanding of Australian laws or their rights."

Ms Lee said most victims arrived legally on tourist, student or 457 visas and many had been duped by recruiters or acquaintances who promised better wages than possible in their homelands.

"Once they're here and working in violation of their visas, they're outside the law. Many victims are resigned to trafficking conditions – which can include unsafe conditions, long shifts and little to no pay – because they need to pay off debts incurred in coming to Australia and send money home to support their families," Ms Lee said.

"Traffickers are known to take return tickets and passports and insinuate that lives, or the lives of family back home, would be in danger if anything were said."

In August, Ms Lee travelled to Canberra as part of a group of lobbyists who met with 117 Members of Parliament and government organisations, including the Australian Federal Police and Attorney-General's Department.

"I discussed victim support and protection – finding ways to remove barriers to assistance. Australia is doing quite well in terms of our response to human trafficking, but we're behind international best practice for support," Ms Lee said.

She said one of the major issues was that to remain on a government support program, a victim needed to actively assist in the judicial process. Failure to work with police left them to seek help from non-governmental organisations, including the Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans, with whom Ms Lee works.

"If they're afraid to work with the authorities, and if proper, culturally appropriate services aren't available, the system doesn't work and people don't get the help they need," Ms Lee said.

Notes to journalists:

From The Australian Institute of Criminology's 'Trends & Issues in crime and criminal justice' no. 441 (June 2012):

... a picture is emerging of the nature of people trafficking as the number of prosecutions grows.

... recently a shift has been seen in both research and policy towards a greater focus on trafficking for the purpose of exploitation in industries other than the sex industry.

Those working under 457 visas are regarded as particularly vulnerable to exploitation. There have been official and unofficial reports of severe exploitation experience by those brought into Australia on 457 visas to work as nurses, chefs and cooks, in the meat industry and in the manufacturing industry.

Further, trafficking matters may not be identified as such; instead, offenders may be charged with a range of other offences including kidnapping/abduction, assault and domestic violence against others.

Groups that have been identified as trafficking people into Australia have been relatively small, with many using family or business contacts to 'facilitate recruitment, movement and visa fraud'.

Most come from low socioeconomic circumstances, sometimes bordering on extreme poverty.

Many are approached by recruiters, friends or acquaintances.

Of those trafficked into Australia, most are known to enter on a valid visa.

Students visas are preferred, because they are five years and it is difficult to identify breaches of the 20 hours per week work conditions.

Worldwide estimates of the number of trafficked persons, ranging from 500,000 to four million, are impossible to verify.

The Australian Government's 2011 *Trafficking in Persons* report:

Most victims of trafficking into Australia have been women forced into the sex industry, but Australia is now seeing victims of trafficking and associated slavery-like practices in other industries. (p1)

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