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(CHILD-SAFE TRAVEL-SAFE)
**HOLIDAY SNAPSHOTS...PROTECTING YOUNG PEOPLE ON EUROPEAN
EXCHANGES FROM ABUSE**

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Background

Legislative and regulatory concerns about the policing and control of child sex offenders, convicted or otherwise; has increased both nationally and internationally during the past three to five years. High profile cases in both the United Kingdom and Belgium have focused attention on the best way of combating such offending.

In August 1996 the first "World Congress Against Commercial and Sexual Exploitation of Children" was organised in Stockholm. Several countries subsequently introduced extra-territorial legislation to prosecute citizens who commit crime against children overseas ("sex tourism") and an increasing interest has been shown in the sex offender "register" concept that was initiated in the USA. Such a register was introduced in the UK under the Sex Offender Act in September 1997. Concerns continue about how to prevent potential child sex offenders gaining employment to work with children. Both the European Union and the Council of Europe have taken decisions with pan-European implications.

The British Government is currently looking at preventing unsuitable people working with children, under the auspices of an interdepartmental working group. Legislation is expected to be introduced in the Spring of 2001 which will lead to the creation of a national Criminal Records Bureau, allowing criminal record checks and, in some cases, intelligence checks to be conducted by employers on such staff. The Premier's Department, NSW, Australia have been working on a similar piece of legislation earlier this year, entitled "Employment Screening Procedures for Child Protection".

Following his innovative work with the "Holiday Snapshots..." research, Detective Superintendent Chris Gould has been collaborating with the interdepartmental working group on behalf of the Association of Chief Police Officers, to ensure that his findings are considered for any future legislation.

Introduction

Just when it seemed that child abuse had infested all possible "child" areas of our society, and that nothing else could shock us or present itself as "new"... along came some extraordinary revelations by two experienced British police officers.

Following exposure that a Spanish boy had been placed within a host family in the policing area of the Avon and Somerset Constabulary, United Kingdom, the father of whom was a known paedophile, Chris Gould and Kaye Jones set about examining school exchanges and the cultural, educational and language commercial business within Europe. They wanted to see exactly who, and what, regulates this multi-billion dollar enterprise.

In April last year, the Home Office awarded a grant to both officers, with a remit to identify the range and extent of child abuse on international visits, focusing primarily upon the European Union. Their research project "Holiday Snapshots...Protecting Young People on European Exchanges from Abuse" has already gained international recognition - even prior to publication. By April 1999, the officers were receiving the Police Research Award for innovation from the Home Secretary Jack Straw MP. By now, this pioneering child protection work of the Avon and Somerset Constabulary, had become known as "Child-Safe" and this specialist area of investigation was referred to as "**Child-Safe Travel-Safe**".

For over a year both officers travelled extensively looking at best practice child protection procedures across the world. The results of their research focus on homestays by young people under the age of 18 and have now been consolidated. The findings were then segmented into a series of practical information books targeted at the main groups involved in organising or using international homestays. The seven books provide practical guidelines on how to set up and monitor child safety policies whilst also providing a solid background of case histories from around the world which illustrate the extent and seriousness of this problem. This paper can only hope to give a brief overview of the issues, findings and recommendations. Further details of the work can be found by accessing the "Child-Safe" website (www.childsafe.co.uk), or by speaking with the authors.

Some things became clear almost immediately. No-one seemed to know the structure of the industry itself, such is its complexity and diversity. The business is totally unregulated and few, if any, checks are being done in respect of host families, agents or organisations. Crimes against children are happening and are either not being reported or the information is suppressed.

The research project was designed to capture anecdotal evidence from across Europe of cases where young people had experienced abuse in this way. These examples were sought in order to establish the range of difficulties that young people were encountering, without speculating as to the scale of the problem unless records and interviews made it statistically possible. This evidence would hopefully reinforce the need for legislation, regulation or controls to be put in place across the European Community. At the very least it would foster debate as to the level of State intervention, raise awareness of the issues, improve self regulation and ultimately lead to enhanced safety and welfare conditions for young travellers.

Objectives

The project has two primary objectives:

- To identify a sample of cases involving child abuse to or by foreign visitors within the European Community, following placements into host families by school exchanges, twinning or other educational or cultural visits.

- To determine how the research findings can be used to assist European Governments, relevant travel organisations or other businesses, language schools, educational authorities or twinning associations in preventing the placement of young people on European exchanges in a home where they are likely to be at risk from abuse.

The project also has three hidden objectives:

- Publicity, to ensure that parents and organisations are made aware of the potential risks inherent with such travel
- To work towards the creation of appropriate legislation or regulation within the UK or Europe
- To publish informative travel books/booklets to targeted audiences offering best practice and guidance alternatives

Methodology (in brief)

- ◇ Press strategy...release of information re research and cases uncovered
- ◇ Personal interviews with victims, parents, organisers, agents, schools, host families
- ◇ Focus days held with specialists both in the UK and abroad
- ◇ Telephone interviews with organisations, victims etc
- ◇ Questionnaires sent to host families, organisations and students (10,000 - UK only)
- ◇ Telephone questionnaire with 54 police forces UK and Channel Islands
- ◇ Extensive literature searches, including internet search and document analysis
- ◇ Visits to USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, The Netherlands, Belgium, Spain etc

Research findings

It has been established that this "industry" is extremely diverse and complex, and for some twenty, thirty or even forty years it has existed without any form of regulation. The standards within the businesses vary dramatically from those which have set up their own professional standards body to those "cowboys" who seasonally set themselves up to make a fast dollar. This can mean, for instance, that children are being placed within homestays that have never been visited, let alone checked. There are many instances where extra children have turned up on the coach and organisers have resorted to knocking on doors randomly in order to find last minute hosts, some have even flicked through telephone directories, ringing locals who may be able to assist and at the same time earn some extra cash.

Within the first three months some 550 cases of abuse had been discovered, ranging from neglect through to emotional, physical and sexual abuse. This was enough to indicate to the authors that there is a problem and from that time their efforts were concentrated on looking for best practice and guidance from which recommendations for change could be made. Whilst the research considers all types of travel that young people under 18 years venture upon; whether it be staying in youth hostels, hotels, igloos or under canvas: 95% of all abuse cases uncovered happened within a homestay environment. The number of recorded cases uncovered during this research now exceeds 1,000.

For many child protection professionals, the cases discovered will not be shocking. They will not be different in any way to those already experienced within their own professional capacities. However, one big difference is that of those first 550 cases which were Europe wide with a handful from New Zealand, Australia, Canada and America; only three had ever been reported to any law enforcement agency.

Victims give many reasons for not reporting, for example; not being able to speak the language; putting up with the situation because it is only a short stay; lack of understanding in relation to culture, practices or procedures; not having a parent or guardian close by or contactable, nor any other adult with whom they feel comfortable to disclose. In many cases, the use of a telephone to either ring home or contact an adult supervisor or guide is restricted or made difficult by homestay rules. In some situations telephone calls are forbidden. Young people travelling abroad or away from home are vulnerable, some more than others.

If a report is made to agents or organisers, the young person is generally removed from the host family, but that is the full extent of the action taken, leaving an offender or suspect free to host again.

Whilst the research focused on cultural, educational and language visits made by under 18 year olds travelling abroad, there was little, if any, safety, welfare or pastoral guidance being given by any organisation. Since this work started in the UK the officers have worked closely with the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), who, following consultation with the authors, have now published "Guidance on Pupil Health and Safety on School Visits" which includes advice about International Visits. The British Incoming Tour Operators Association (BITOA) have also consulted the authors and produced a "Homestay Committee Report" giving advice for homestays. The British Council, ARELS and BASELT have also published some of the earlier pieces of guidance issued during this research.

The complexity and diversity of this industry, coupled with apparent under-reporting of incidents of abuse to the authorities, has resulted in law enforcement agencies having little, if any, intelligence or information on this area of criminality. Limited intelligence and involvement, that is: until now. Law enforcement includes not only the police, but Customs and Excise, Immigration, Europol, Interpol, National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) as well as prosecution lawyers.

Specific Cases

Cases range from children not being fed at all whilst on a visit, to those fed solely on such things as peanut butter or jam in order to save money. Others have slept three to a bed, some sleeping under beds or in a cupboard under the stairs and others as young as seven or eight who have simply been left or abandoned and have quickly found themselves to be lost.

There have been cases where host family circumstances have changed and visitors have been turned out of the home following domestic disputes or some who were not accepted into the home in the first instance. Many children and young people have been victims of acquisitive crime with property or money being stolen. Some have suffered verbal and racial abuse and we have heard many reports of young people who have been exposed to domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse by their hosts.

At the more sinister, thin end of the wedge, there are known, or suspected, sex offenders or child abusers who have infiltrated the "industry" - either acting as hosts or attaining more prominent positions as language school teachers or even agents or organisers. The researchers came across cases of known paedophiles who have been trafficking vulnerable young people from places like Albania into Europe. At this time, it is still difficult to determine the full extent of abuse or the level of such incursion. Suffice to say, that what has been revealed is considered to be just the tip of the iceberg.

There are but a few known, reported cases that have subsequently been investigated and prosecuted. In Perth, Western Australia, a 65 year old organiser was convicted less than two years ago of the sodomy, amongst other crimes, of a 14 year old indigenous boy who was en route from the north to stay with a host family in the South West. This man had been abusing vulnerable children on such cultural exchanges for many years.

In Minnesota, USA, a 17 year old French boy who stayed with a host family, was convicted of the sexual assault of the 12 year old daughter of his hosts, following several days of molestation.

In Nottinghamshire, UK a host father was convicted of possession of pornographic videos following a disclosure by the young Spanish boy whom it is believed he was sexually attempting to groom.

Scale of the problem

The scale of this problem is unknown due to the inadequate records kept within Europe in respect of youth travel. Essentially, there is no base line from which to begin calculations. However, to give the issue some perspective, estimates from tourist records kept by the British Tourist Authority and the English Tourist Board, indicate that in 1998 some 4 million children under the age of 18 entered the UK. Of those, just over 1 million travelled on what are recorded as independent holidays or studies.

From a European search, the researchers estimate that in 1998 between 5 and 6 million children and young people travelled abroad on cultural, educational or language trips, the majority of which passed without incident. Although impossible to say accurately, the officers' professional view from the work conducted so far is that in total approximately 4-5% per annum are suffering some form of abuse.

There are some 60+ million school aged children in Europe, so the potential growth in this area of travel is huge. Youth tourism already represents 20% of the world tourist market and this figure is growing. In 1998, within the UK alone, student expenditure was in excess of £1 billion (including course fees, accommodation and travel).

To give a further example of the size and scale to this "industry", the Federation of International Youth Travel Organisations (FIYTO) represent some 289 member organisations world-wide in 72 different countries. Their turnover per annum is 6 billion US dollars, serving some 14 million young people travelling annually and selling over 6 million air and surface tickets.

Research Methodology

Within the United Kingdom the officers circulated

- 5,280 host family questionnaires
- 1,242 student questionnaires to international visitors within the UK
- 574 questionnaires to school aged pupils (12-14 years)
- 1,260 questionnaires to university students
- 731 questionnaires to organisers

The return rate is at present in excess of 15%, however, responses continue to be received almost daily.

Following the implementation of a media strategy many individuals came forward and face to face interviews were conducted with victims, parents, organisers, agents, teachers and others. An abundance of mail has been received from people with concerns together with supporters of this work and organisations looking to implement changes as well as many individuals who have suffered abuse whilst travelling in this way.

Experiments were conducted in various parts of the UK, and police checks were made on host families employed by certain organisations. In one such experiment, 700 families were checked, 26 had serious convictions for offences such as supplying drugs, armed robbery, indecency offences, serious assaults and two known paedophiles were identified.

Numerous focus days have been held gathering experts together both in the UK and Spain. Searches have been made, throughout Europe and beyond, including both literature trawls and the examination of travel statistics and existing legislation. Meetings have taken place with Europeans from the travel industry, youth exchange, education, child protection charities, law enforcement and others both on a formal and informal basis.

Presentations have been made by the authors at both the House of Commons, UK, and the European Parliament in Brussels highlighting the concerns and problems within this area of youth and student travel. Ministers are now working towards airing these issues within the European Parliament Civil Liberties and Internal Affairs Committee.

Emerging facts from completed host family questionnaires

- only 11.6% of host families were interviewed face to face
- only 13% were obliged to supply references
- around 10% were never visited by the agents or organisations nearly 10% of organisers making a home visit failed to check on students' sleeping arrangements or facilities
- over half were not asked to sign any form of contract
- only 10.6% of host families received an unannounced visit

- 61.5% work for language schools
- Only 25.5% of host families were asked if they would consent to a police check
- Only 10.9% were required to look after students' welfare
- 25.2% of host families said that they had experienced "difficulties" when hosting
- 21.2% of these said the organiser had been "unhelpful" or "very unhelpful" at these times
- 93.9% of host families were given information about their student prior to their arrival
- 65.6% were provided with guidance and practical support from the organiser

Recommendations - the way forward

Earlier in this report the use of criminal records checks was alluded to. The authors are clear, however, that at this time, this is not the answer. A code of practice ensuring a minimum standard of operation must be implemented throughout this industry and criminal records checks may form part of this as an additional safeguard.

The following is a brief synopsis of the detail contained within the travel guide booklets which the authors have produced. The books themselves will contain suggested formats for written documentation, proformas of checklists, examples of forms and full explanations of the bullet points listed below

- Young people must be protected from harm and their general welfare promoted
- Children have rights - this must be recognised and they must be treated with respect
- Awareness of child protection issues should be raised throughout your organisation - consider addressing the following
 - write a mission statement for your organisation
 - ensure that you have a child protection policy
 - identify a "Child Protection Officer"
- Develop safety procedures which minimise the likelihood of children and young people being harmed and which enable organisers and others to respond effectively to accidents or suspected cases of abuse.
- Empower children and young people and their parents
 - give them information about the culture of the country in which they will stay
 - tell them where they will be living
 - give helpline numbers and emergency contact points
 - give everyone involved in the trip an opportunity to feed back about their experiences
 - inform parents of all arrangements and itineraries
- Establish links with parents and other relevant organisations, both in this country and abroad

- Create the right environment to ensure a safe and successful experience - the key points are
 - Support
 - Communication
 - Information
 - Preparation
- Share information about any problems or concerns you may have about individuals or in general
 - with each other
 - between agencies
- Develop good practice and
 - review and continue to progress and develop
 - hold regular seminars and invite people from all aspects of your business
 - commercial groups who hold conferences should extend invitations to the voluntary sector and others who are involved in the same work
- Make sure you have appropriate management practices in place
 - raise your standards of child safety
 - implement a preventative strategy - it is better to avoid a problem than to risk the safety of a young person
- Ensure adequate pre-trip planning is conducted
 - Consider making a risk assessment of the homestays into which young people will be placed
 - distribute bi-lingual help cards - in the visitor's own language with the English equivalent
 - advise host families about possible requirements for insurance relating to both property and their vehicle
- Implement proper training - host parents may be acting in loco parentis and they need to understand the implications of this, as well as your staff/employees
 - ensure a basic level of first aid
 - give adequate health and safety training
 - make sure they understand what to do if a child protection issue arises
 - record and evaluate incidents at homestays - and share the information with each other and between agencies where appropriate
 - Leaders should be fully trained and aware of their responsibilities
- Recruitment of host families - for instance, language schools in the UK can do the following
 - Contact Area Child Protection Committees to let them know you exist
 - Form a relationship with your Community Beat Officer
 - Subject access checks can currently be undertaken for a fee
 - An interdepartmental working group has been established to look at the following new pieces of legislation
 - Preventing unsuitable people working with children
 - Criminal Records Bureau
 - Check employee details against the DfEE List 99

- Check employee details against the D H Consultancy Service
- Define the role of a host family - all parties need to be aware of expectations
- Address the suitability of current advertising for host families, photographs of children and some text phrases may be wholly inappropriate and attract the wrong type of host
- Screen applicants
 - conduct interviews over the telephone and in person
 - make sure that every person who regularly stays within the household has been met
 - ask for a declaration to be signed by each member of the household stating there is no reason why that person should not have access to children and that they have no criminal convictions
 - two people should conduct interviews wherever possible
 - check the identification of the household members - use the voters' register
 - ask for references - and then follow them up
- Check out accommodation
 - hosts should be made aware of the organisation's terms and conditions
 - hosts should be aware of all relevant regulations, legislation and safety issues
 - an accommodation checklist should be completed
 - a host family application form and contract should be signed and dated
- Remember
 - children and young people should always be listened to, given a sense of belonging and kept safe from harm
 - parents should be informed, supported and encouraged
 - staff and volunteers who work with children and young people should be trained, supported and protected

European Conference, Bath, 18-22 August 1999

Between 18 and 22 August 1999 invitations were extended to over 100 expert delegates from the 29 Council of Europe Countries. These experts, from law enforcement, social services, health, youth travel, education and various children's charities and non-governmental organisations, together with government and European Commission representatives, heard key note speeches and took part in inter-active workshop sessions. Delegates were given an opportunity to critique the work of the authors and present their personal and organisational perspectives in relation to the issues raised.

The conference concluded with each of the European experts endorsing and validating both the work and the research findings. Undertakings were given that the Child-Safe Travel-Safe guidance would be promoted in each of the Council of Europe countries and lobbying of governments would continue. Through this inaugural network, delegates committed themselves to continue to work in their respective countries, supporting each other to the goal of enhanced welfare, safety and pastoral care of children and young people engaged in international travel.

UK Launch - House of Commons, 11 October 1999

On 11 October 1999 the Child-Safe Travel-Safe booklets were launched at the House of Commons, London, by Home Office Minister Charles Clarke MP. Other dignitaries present included Senator Landon Pearson, Advisor on Children's rights, Canadian Senate; Diana Lamplugh, Suzy Lamplugh Trust; Gordon Blakely, British Council; together with representatives from the Department for Education and Employment, The Federation of International Youth Travel Organisations and children's charities such as Childline and the NSPCC.

Conclusion

You would not send your child to a house at the end of your street if you knew nothing about the person living there. Yet on the strength of a glossy brochure, the payment in some cases of vast sums of money, and an assumption that someone else has asked the right questions, we send our children thousands of miles across the world to stay with strangers.

The companies, organisations and individuals that abuse this blind trust cannot be allowed to continue to profit from it and we must all take responsibility for the care and safety of our young people.