

BULGARIA ANNUAL HOTLINE REPORT 2022

ABOUT THE BULGARIAN NATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING HOTLINE

The Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline (The Hotline) is a dedicated service that supports victims of human trafficking and provides advice and assistance on human trafficking issues to the general public. A21 Bulgaria officially launched the Hotline in 2015 in partnership with the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings. The Hotline is the only resource in Bulgaria committed to solely handling human trafficking reports 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Trained call specialists are equipped to handle calls in over 230 languages through a tele-interpretation service. As Bulgaria continues to be one of the primary source countries of human trafficking in the EU,¹ the Hotline receives a high proportion of reports regarding potential victims of trafficking located outside of Bulgaria. Therefore, the Hotline's trained call specialists work in close partnership with both Bulgarian national institutions and those in other EU nations to respond quickly and effectively to each report.

'I will always be grateful for what you have done for me and my family.'

—Survivor Recovered After Calling the Hotline

OVERVIEW OF DATA²

The Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline receives reports via phone, email, text, and the dedicated Hotline website (www.080020100.bg). In 2022, the Hotline received 1,071 contacts, 35% more than the previous year. This increase may in part be a result of improved awareness campaigns of the Hotline and its services, including promoting the Hotline at in-person presentations and trainings which resumed after the government lifted COVID-19 restrictions. The majority (69.9%) of contacts to the Hotline were human trafficking related. The number of online contacts to the Hotline continues to increase (up by 243.7% since 2020) but still only accounts for 5.1% of the total contacts made to the Hotline.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

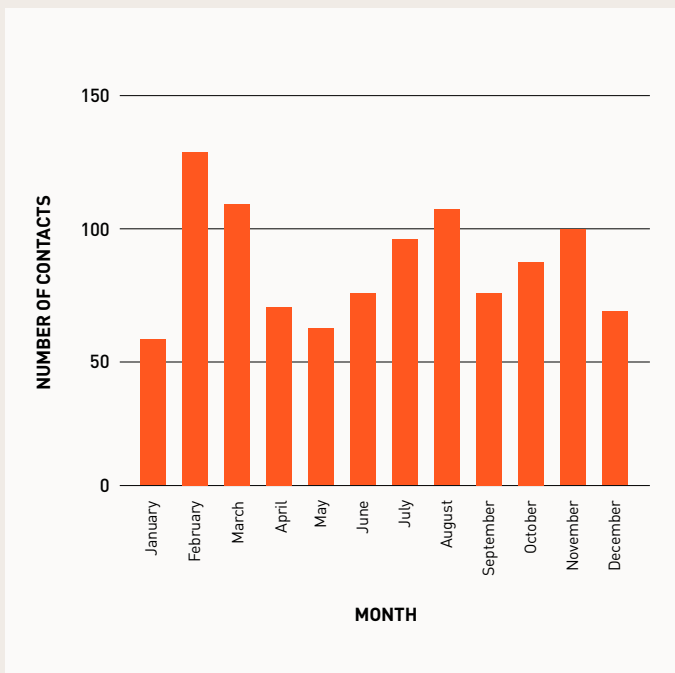
- The Hotline received a total of **1,071 CONTACTS**
- The Hotline identified and/or assisted **42 VICTIMS** of trafficking
- The majority of potential victims reported to the Hotline were **FEMALE (69.1%)**
- **ADULTS (90.1%)** comprised the majority of potential victims reported to the Hotline.
- The majority of potential victims reported to the Hotline were **BULGARIAN (89%)**
- The most common recruitment method in cases reported to the Hotline was **FALSE JOB OPPORTUNITIES (43.2%)**
- The Hotline team submitted **32 POLICE REPORTS**
- There were **44% more JOB VETTING REQUESTS** in 2022 than in 2021
- The majority of victims reported to the hotline were victims of either **LABOUR EXPLOITATION (37%)** or **SEXUAL EXPLOITATION (38.8%)**

Contacts to the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline comprise all incoming enquiries to the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline through any means, including but not limited to phone calls, emails, SMS and online web submissions. These enquiries include all reports on potential human trafficking, various crimes both related and unrelated to human trafficking, and queries about human trafficking generally, as well as requests for various types of assistance related to human trafficking, such as safety planning or job vetting.

'Reports' only include contacts to the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline relating to a potential human trafficking situation.

The statistics below are exclusively drawn from substantive contacts made to the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline from January - December 2022 concerning human trafficking matters. This report is not a reflection of all substantive calls to the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline which may include calls related to other high-risk crimes, labour exploitation and other non-trafficking issues.

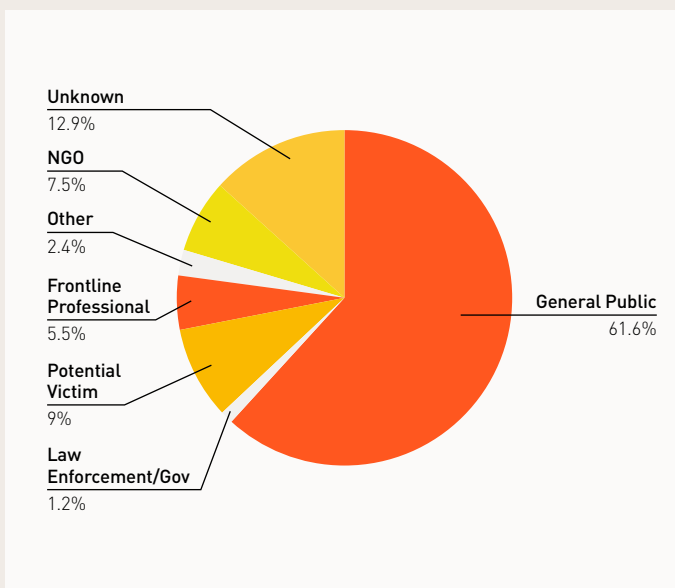
Disaggregated data has been collected on each individual case based on descriptive factors including gender, age, type of trafficking, methods of control and recruitment methods. The data contained herein is based on the cases where the information was available. In the majority of cases, the call specialists were unable to glean full or specific details about the case. The data contained herein is based on cases where the specified information was made available.



The above chart reflects the number of contacts to the Hotline.

CALLER DEMOGRAPHICS

Since its inception in 2015, the Hotline has received reports from potential victims, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), law enforcement, frontline professionals and the general public. In 2022, the majority of contacts to the Hotline (61.6%) originated from the general public. These contacts include concerned friends and family members of potential victims and witnesses of suspicious activity from within the community. The significance and success of A21's efforts in promoting the Hotline to the community are demonstrated in this consistently high number of contacts from the general public. Although potential victims of trafficking only account for 9% of contacts to the Hotline, these contacts generated 26% of the cases related to a confirmed human trafficking victim.



'I am happy for you, that you are dedicated and want to help women, men, and children in need. God bless you for your good work.'

—A Hotline Caller

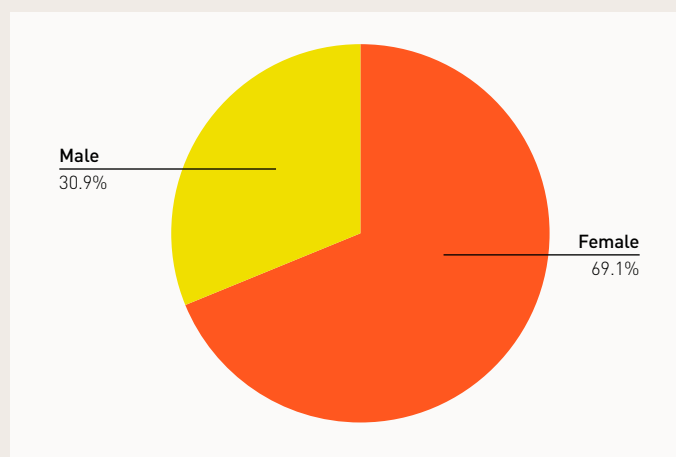
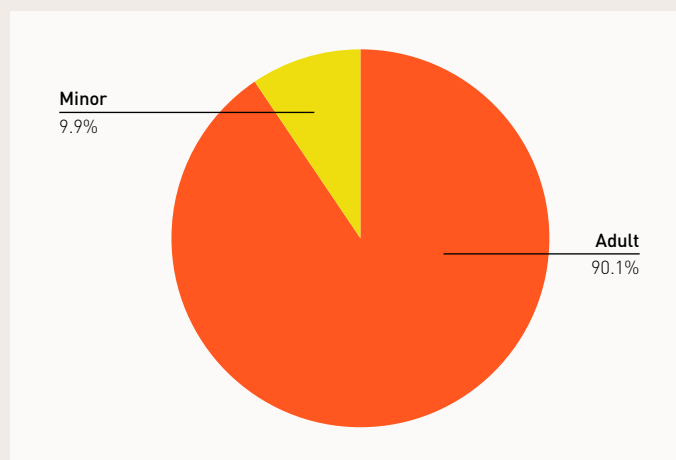
VICTIM DEMOGRAPHICS

In 2022, the Hotline successfully identified and/or assisted 42 victims of trafficking, 25 of whom subsequently entered A21's After-care Program for support throughout their recovery. This support included international repatriation services for eight survivors as well as national relocation for 11 survivors.

AGE AND GENDER

Females comprised 69.1% of the potential victims reported to the Hotline, with males constituting the remaining 30.9%. While the percentage of potential male victims reported to the Hotline has decreased since 2021, this number is still significantly higher than the 6.9% of reported male victims in 2020.

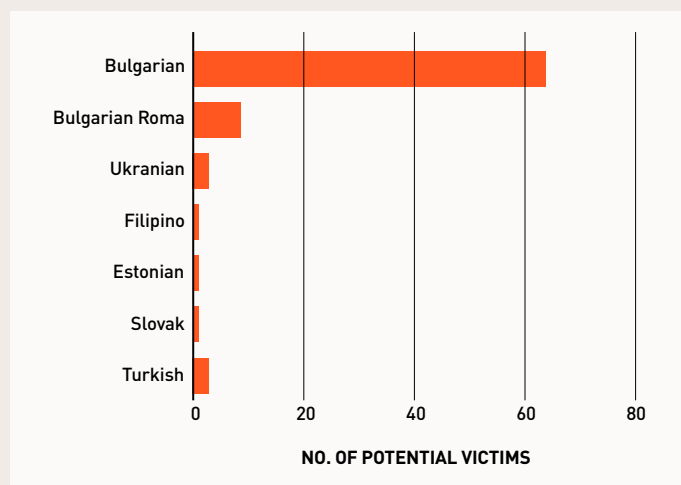
In 2022, the Hotline received nine times more cases involving adults compared to minors. This ongoing trend of higher adult cases is not surprising as cases related to minors are normally reported to the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) Hotline in Bulgaria. For any cases involving minors, the Hotline works with the SACP to appropriately support the minor.



VICTIM NATIONALITY

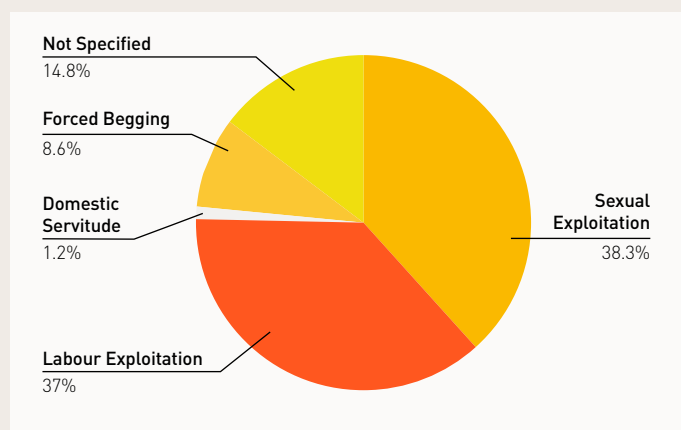
Eighty-nine percent of potential victims reported to the Hotline in 2022 were Bulgarian nationals; of these, 11.1% were Bulgarian nationals of Roma ethnic origin. While this follows the year-on-year trend that Bulgarians constitute the majority of potential victims reported, Hotline data reveals a significant decrease in reports of Roma potential victims from 54.4% in 2021 to 11.1% in 2022. The high number of Bulgarian potential victims may be due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased unemployment in Bulgaria, thus making Bulgarian nationals more vulnerable to exploitation.

The remaining 11% of potential victims were foreign nationals, with Turkish and Ukrainian being the most prevalent. While this number remains low, the number of reported cases involving foreign nationals has increased by 233% since 2021 with the reopening of borders post-pandemic.



EXPLOITATION TYPE

In 2022, 37% of victims reported to the Hotline experienced labour exploitation, and 38.3% experienced sexual exploitation. Although this reflects an increase in cases involving sexual exploitation since 2021, this is still significantly lower than in 2020, when sexual exploitation comprised 86.2% of reported cases. Interestingly, in 2022, the Hotline addressed misconceptions of trafficking being limited to the sexual exploitation of women during their promotion of the Hotline's services on an employment website. In addition, as many Bulgarians lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19, many sought new jobs abroad.

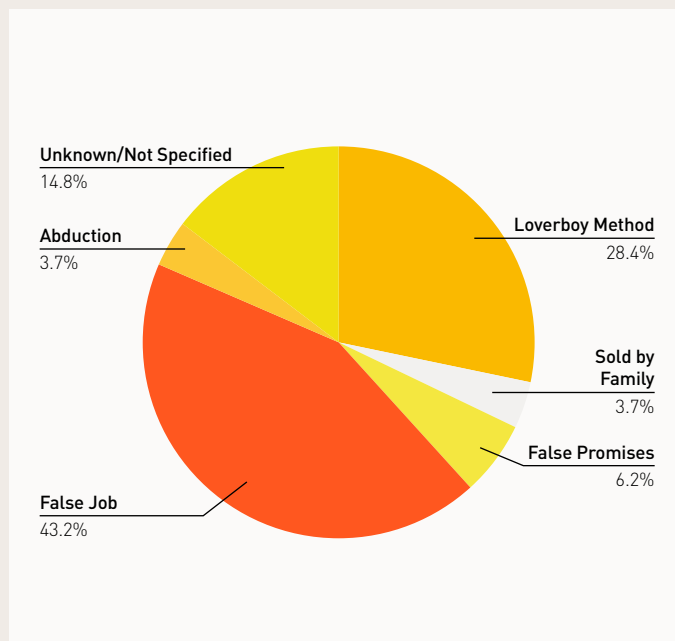


RECRUITMENT METHODS

Perpetrators of human trafficking use certain recruitment methods to deceive and coerce victims into situations of exploitation. These methods vary from the 'loverboy' method to false promises to being sold by a family member. Throughout 2022, the leading recruitment method used by perpetrators was through false job opportunities, constituting 43.2% of cases reported to the Hotline. The most consistent prevalent recruitment method over the past three years have been false job opportunities; this is likely because Bulgaria has the lowest GDP in Europe, sitting at 43% lower than the rest of the EU,³ making Bulgarian nationals more vulnerable to exploitation.

Consistent with the Hotline's 2021 report, the Hotline identified the 'loverboy' method, a scheme involving grooming and manipulating a victim into a false romantic relationship to exploit them, as the next main type of recruitment method. This was the primary method of recruitment in 28.4% of cases.

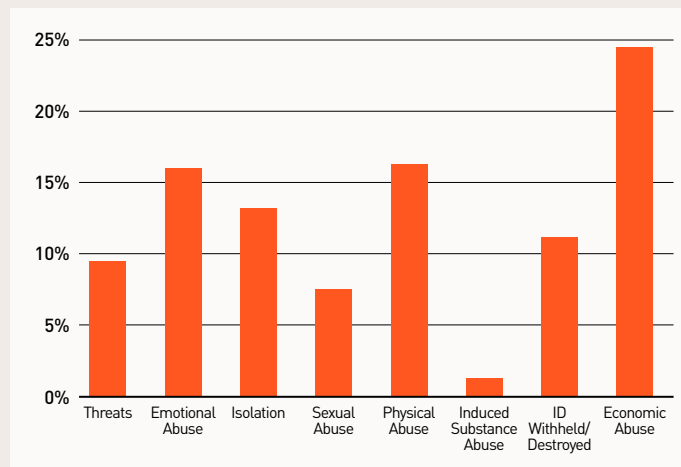
Other methods used in cases reported to the Hotline include false promises, where perpetrators promise the victim a better life (6.2%), abduction (3.7%) and being sold by a family member (3.7%).



As part of its effort to curtail those being recruited through false job opportunities, the Hotline offers A21's Job Vetting Program, a service that screens employment opportunities. Under the Job Vetting Program, call specialists provide guidance on safely seeking employment to callers inquiring about the validity of certain job postings. In 2022, the Hotline advertised this service on Bulgaria's largest job search website, www.jobs.bg, and in Facebook groups focused on international employment opportunities. After advertising this service, 'job vetting' requests increased by 44% from the previous year. Notably, while screening these employment opportunities, call specialists identified a suspicious job in over half of the requests submitted during the reporting year (53.8%). Most job vetting requests involved employment opportunities abroad, primarily in Germany or the Netherlands.

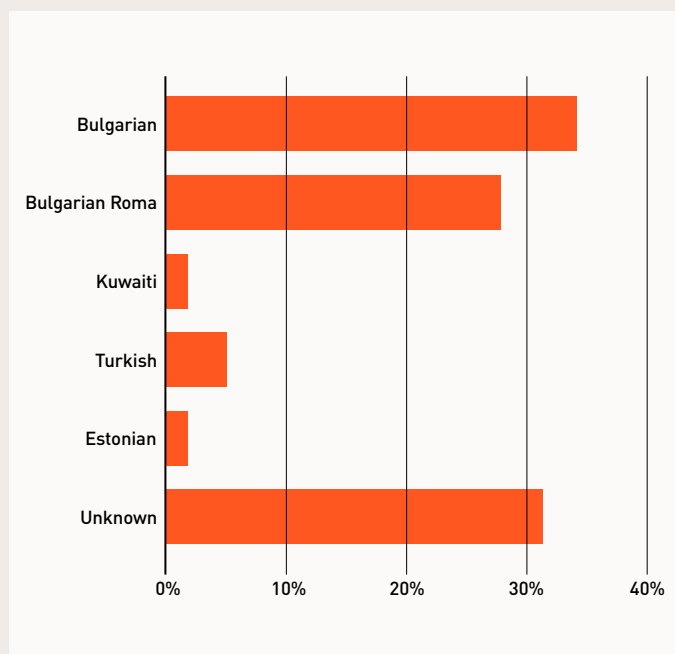
METHODS OF CONTROL

To keep victims in exploitative situations, traffickers use various methods of control involving manipulation and coercion. The methods of control used in cases reported to the Hotline include threats,⁴ isolation,⁵ emotional, physical, sexual, or economic⁶ abuse, forced substance misuse, and the destruction or withholding of personal identification documents. Victims of human trafficking often experience multiple methods of control to keep them in exploitative situations. Reports to the Hotline in 2022 support economic abuse as the most common method of control, used in nearly 25% of cases reported to the Hotline; this includes withholding of wages or debt bondage. The Hotline also identified both physical (17%) and emotional (16.3%) abuse as common methods of control used by traffickers in reported cases.



PERPETRATOR DEMOGRAPHICS

The perpetrator's nationality is often unknown in a significant proportion of cases reported to the Hotline (30.9%). However, in cases where the suspected trafficker's nationality is reported, the most common nationality was Bulgarian (34.6%), followed by Bulgarian Roma (28.4%). Other nationalities reported include Turkish, Kuwaiti, and Estonian.



CAN YOU SEE ME? HOTLINE CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED.



In October 2022, A21 Bulgaria launched the *Can You See Me?* (CYSM) public awareness campaign in Bulgaria. A21's CYSM campaign is a global public awareness campaign designed to educate viewers to recognise and report possible human trafficking to the appropriate hotline, which in Bulgaria is operated by A21. The CYSM campaign in Bulgaria depicts common labour and sexually exploitative situations encountered by Bulgarians. Through film, imagery and audio, the recipient is made aware of these common types of exploitative situations, along with a means of reporting their suspicions or requesting assistance through the advertisement of the Bulgarian

National Human Trafficking Hotline number. The CYSM campaign reached a potential 4.2 million people in Bulgaria through billboards along main roads, metro station television screens, airport television screens, as well as national radio. Within weeks of the launch, the Hotline received reports of suspected trafficking as a direct result of the CYSM campaign, including the identification and extraction of a family being trafficked for labour. After the successful launch of the CYSM campaign, the number of contacts to the Hotline in November and December 2022 increased by 102% compared to the same period in 2021.

HIGHLIGHTS

The survivors in each of these cases courageously took steps to escape and, against all odds, are now free.



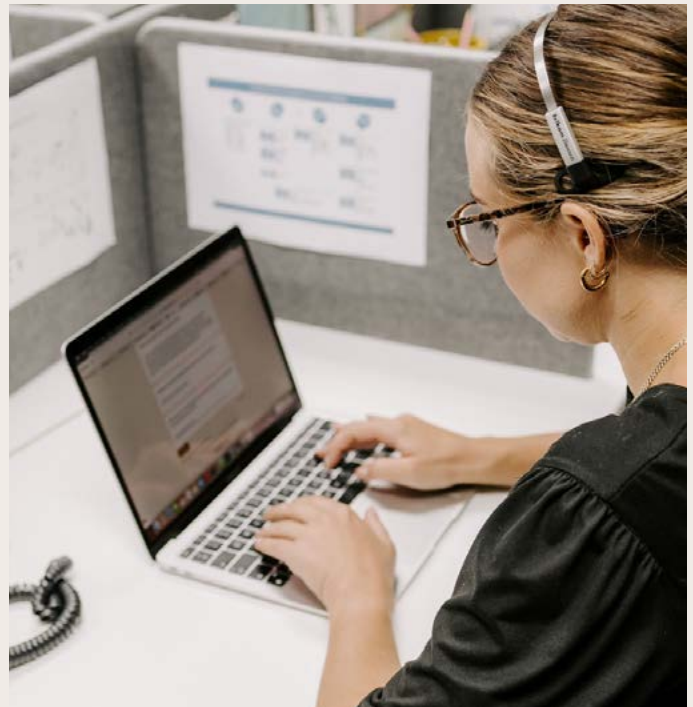
TRAFFICKING VICTIM SELF-IDENTIFIES AFTER HEARING CYSM RADIO CAMPAIGN

As a direct result of A21's *Can You See Me?* public awareness campaign in Bulgaria, a family of four was discovered and recovered from exploitation. The parents had been victims of labour trafficking for seven years. Although the children themselves were not trafficked, they were subject to the same living conditions as their parents - living without electricity or heating for the last five years. The father heard the CYSM? campaign and the advertised Hotline number on a small radio he had access to, with limited stations, including the National Radio Station. The father was extremely hesitant to call the Hotline as he had previously unsuccessfully attempted to escape. On that prior occasion, the trafficker had beaten and threatened him. However, despite his initial fears, the father, after thinking through options, summoned enough courage to call the Hotline. The Hotline call specialists worked closely with the police, coordinating to safely extract the whole family. The family is now safe, and the father has since called the Hotline to thank them for their assistance. The entire family has entered A21's Aftercare Program, where A21 caseworkers are assisting them obtain new identification documents, rebuild their lives and enrol the children in school.

HOTLINE SECURES HOUSING FOR SURVIVOR OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

The Hotline received a call from a physician regarding a woman who had experienced years of sexual exploitation before escaping from her trafficker. The victim had been recruited via the 'loverboy' method, by a man she met whilst visiting another city. Soon thereafter, he began to sexually exploit her, controlling her through both physical and emotional abuse. The trafficker withheld her identification documents and at one point transported her to another country. Eventually, she escaped from her trafficker. However, while now physically free, she found herself homeless. After a few days, a member of the public saw her and called the police for assistance, who in turn contacted an ambulance for medical assistance.

Upon meeting and examining the survivor, a physician called the Hotline for assistance. Within three hours of receiving this report, the Hotline call specialists procured safe accommodation for the survivor. The survivor then entered the A21 Aftercare Program where she is receiving assistance to support her recovery, including care packages, access to medical care, and support from her caseworker, amongst other services.





FOREIGN NATIONAL ESCAPES DOMESTIC SERVITUDE IN BULGARIA

The Hotline received a call from a man providing shelter to a woman who had escaped domestic servitude. The woman had travelled to Bulgaria with her ‘employer’ under the impression that she would be employed as a housekeeper for his family. Instead, she was trafficked and forced to work up to 20 hours a day upon arrival. Her trafficker withheld her identification documents, emotionally abused her and left her without any food. She became isolated as she was no longer able to contact any family or friends.

The woman managed one day to successfully access the internet, and find community members willing to assist her. Working with these community members, she courageously decided to escape, and did so successfully. She first ran to the nearest police station, and then connected with those community contacts who provided her with temporary housing. Once safe, she called the Hotline for assistance in finding permanent housing and retrieving her identification documents. She now has a safe place to live and is receiving support in the A21 Aftercare Program.

ENDNOTES

¹ “2022 Trafficking in Persons Report.” *US Department of State*, July 2022, www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report. Accessed 14 Feb. 2023.

² To ensure data integrity, the data presented is extracted from reports submitted to the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline consisting of those identified as victims and likely potential victims of trafficking. This report takes a conservative approach in presenting Hotline data and analysis, omitting reports of potential victims of human trafficking which were unable to be minimally substantiated.

³ “GDP per capita, consumption per capita and price level indices - Statistics Explained.” Eurostat, December 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=GDP_per_capita,_consumption_per_capita_and_price_level_indices#Overview Accessed 24 April 2023.

⁴ Threats include threats of harm to the victim, their family or other individuals; to the victim’s reputation; or to report them to the police, immigration authorities or other government authorities.

⁵ Isolation may include physical isolation or deprivation of liberty, denying access to medical support, surveillance or control of the victim in public, and isolating the victim by moving them frequently from place to place.

⁶ Economic abuse includes situations of debt bondage or where traffickers limit the victim’s finances either in whole or in part.

As a service situated to support those in exploitative situations, the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline is at the forefront of understanding emerging human trafficking trends in Bulgaria. Each year the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline commits to expanding its networks and partners across Bulgaria to ensure that an accurate scope of trafficking is reflected in the data collected. The Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline welcomes new partners interested in counter-human trafficking efforts in Bulgaria. Partnerships are vital not only to provide services to identified trafficking survivors and communities requesting training, but also to increase awareness about the services provided by the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline across Bulgaria.



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The observations contained in this report are limited to information communicated to the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline during the reporting period. Nothing arising from the data should be interpreted as showing the full extent or prevalence of human trafficking in Bulgaria.