

BULGARIA ANNUAL HOTLINE REPORT 2023

ABOUT THE BULGARIAN NATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING HOTLINE

The Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline (The Hotline) is a specialised service dedicated to supporting victims of human trafficking. Launched in 2015 by A21 Bulgaria, in collaboration with the National Commission for Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings, it offers advice and assistance to the general public on human trafficking issues. 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 230 languages through a tele-interpretation service. Given Bulgaria's status as primarily a source country in the EU,¹ the Hotline receives a significant number of reports regarding Bulgarian nationals trafficked internationally. To support this, the Hotline's call specialists collaborate closely with both Bulgarian national institutions and similar government ministries in other EU countries. This collaborative effort allows for a swift and effective response to each report, acknowledging the importance of combatting human trafficking on an international scale.

*'Thank you very, very much for your quick response
and for the overall organisation on your part.'*

—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 2023, the Hotline received 1153 contacts, a 7.7% increase from 2022. This increase can be attributed to A21 Bulgaria's increased presence in the media throughout the year; several radio interviews publicised the Hotline's number throughout Bulgaria. Moreover, the majority of contacts (61.8%) to the Hotline related directly to human trafficking. Historically, people primarily contacted the Hotline by phone. In 2022, there was a rise in online contacts, including SMS, WhatsApp and the use of the webform on the Hotline's website. This form made up 5.1% of total contacts in 2022, but this number decreased in 2023. This highlights that phone calls remain the preferred method of communication for the general public to reach the Hotline.

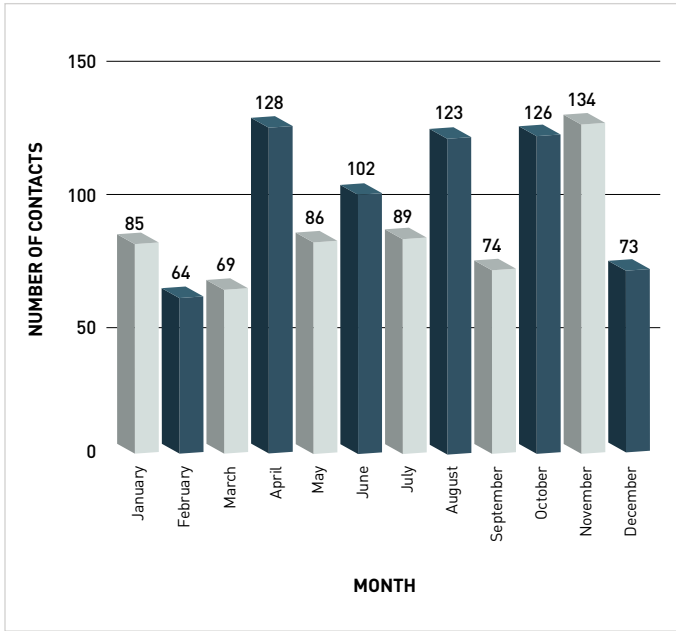
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Hotline received a total of **1153 CONTACTS**, a 7.7% increase from 2022
- The Hotline identified and/or assisted **23 VICTIMS**
- The majority of potential victims reported to the Hotline were **FEMALE (64.2%)**
- The majority of victims reported to the Hotline were **BULGARIAN NATIONALS**
- The most common recruitment method in cases reported to the Hotline was **SOLD BY FAMILY**
- The Hotline submitted **24 POLICE REPORTS**
- There were **76.9%** more **JOB VETTING REQUESTS** in 2023 than in 2022
- The majority of victims to the Hotline were victims of **SEXUAL EXPLOITATION**

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

The statistics in this report are exclusively drawn from substantive contacts made to the Hotline from January–December 2023 concerning human trafficking matters. This report is not a reflection of all substantive calls to the Hotline, which may include calls related to other high-risk crimes, labour exploitation, and other non-trafficking issues.

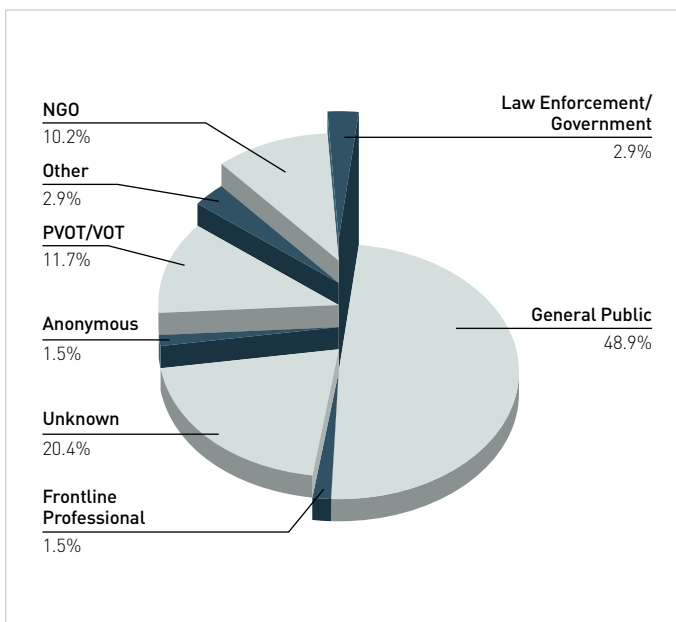
When available, disaggregated data on descriptive factors, including gender, age, type of trafficking, methods of control and recruitment methods, has been collected on each individual case.



The above chart reflects the number of contacts to the Hotline in 2023

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. Consistent with previous years, the highest percentage of contacts in 2023 originated from the general public (48.9%). Contacts from the general public include concerned friends and family members of potential victims and community members who witness suspicious activity within the community. Over the past year, calls from potential victims have increased by 29.9% to comprise 11.7% of all calls to the Hotline. The increase in calls confirm the importance of awareness in countering human trafficking.



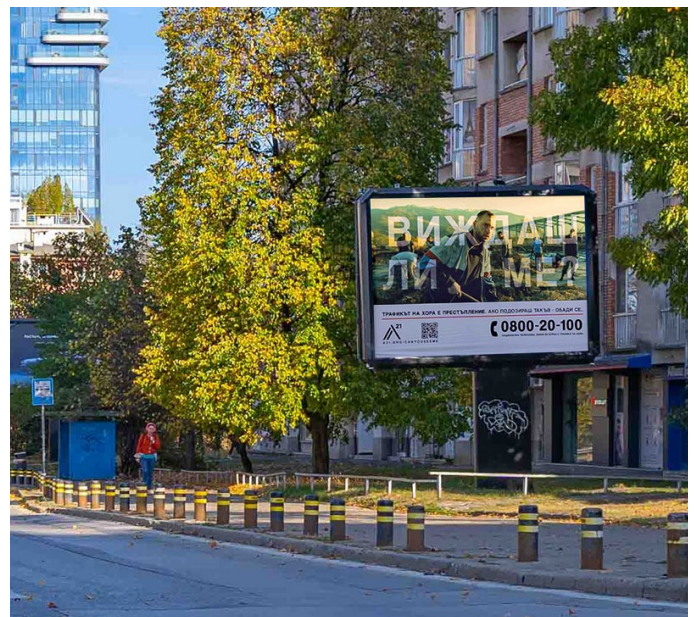
'Despite calling on Sunday, operators showed empathy and understanding of the need of urgent shelter and managed to organise everything so that a girl, who had been a victim, was recovered. I appreciate your assistance!'

— A community member who called to help a victim of sexual exploitation.

CYSM? PROMOTES THE HOTLINE THROUGHOUT BULGARIA

Throughout 2023, A21 Bulgaria focused significant efforts on promoting the Hotline's services in the media, particularly via radio interviews, the use of A21's *Can You See Me?*³ (CYSM?) campaign and A21's annual Walk for Freedom⁴ (WFF) that took place in October. In February 2023, A21 Bulgaria secured a grant from the German Federal Foreign Office to distribute the *CYSM?* campaign across Bulgaria throughout the year to both educate the general public on human trafficking in Bulgaria, as well as publicise the Hotline. With this funding, the team successfully screened the full *CYSM?* movies in cinemas, distributed billboards along key highways and in towns and featured the videos on LED screens at Sofia and Varna International Airports throughout the entire year. Furthermore, the *CYSM?* posters and accompanying educational materials were distributed across all 28 regions in Bulgaria.

Notably, the Roma TV channels broadcasted the *CYSM?* videos, reaching vulnerable Roma communities in Bulgaria, a demographic particularly at risk of being trafficked. All *CYSM?* materials advertised the Hotline's number to encourage the community to take action by reporting suspicious activities. The campaign reached over 100,000 individuals, and had 22 million impressions. Interestingly, the increase in contacts to the Hotline by victims coincided with the distribution of *CYSM?*'s campaign, which encourages victims to call the Hotline for assistance.



SIX CITIES IN BULGARIA HOST WALK FOR FREEDOM

In 2023, Bulgaria's WFF drew the participation of over 500 individuals across six cities, with most participants attending WFF for the first time. Throughout the event, volunteers distributed flyers to raise awareness about the issue of human trafficking, including the Hotline number. While WFF is a single-day event, A21 Bulgaria maximised this opportunity by utilising social media as a pre-campaign initiative to educate the general public about human trafficking. The pre-campaign initiative showcased a series of photos of Bulgarian actors, screenwriters and directors holding signs about human trafficking and their reasons for supporting WFF, and encouraging others to engage in the issue. The participation of well-known people from across Bulgaria significantly increased the visibility of both WFF and A21's work, including the services provided by the Hotline. Such initiatives likely contributed to the significant number of calls from the general public to the Hotline in 2023.



A21 Bulgaria also sought to increase the identification of potential victims of trafficking (PVOs) in 2023 through its Professional Training Program. This program recognises that certain professionals have a higher likelihood of encountering a potential victim of human trafficking due to the nature of their work. Understanding the key role of these frontline professionals, A21 provides targeted training so that these professionals understand the fundamental principles underlying human trafficking, recognise human trafficking in their country and utilise a victim-centred approach. Finally, A21 provides education on the Hotline's services to further support frontline professionals in identifying and supporting any potential victims they encounter. Over the course of 2023, A21 Bulgaria provided nine training sessions, training a total of 351 frontline professionals, including individuals from law enforcement, health care, education, social workers, government sectors and journalists. As this program progresses, the Hotline anticipates not only an increase in the number of victims identified but also an increase in collaboration between the Hotline and frontline professionals in countering human trafficking.

Indeed, proper training leads to the prevention of exploitation. Attendees have contacted the Hotline to report suspected trafficking after such training sessions. A21, together with the local Commission for Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings, provided a special one-day frontline professional training in Sliven for 11 police officers and 16 social workers on identifying trafficking and providing psychosocial support for survivors of sex trafficking. Two attendees later called the Hotline to report two different potential human trafficking situations: one involved potential recruitment via the 'loverboy' scheme, and the other related to a group of individuals exploited for labour for which they were unpaid. The Hotline followed up on both cases, locating the potential victims and offering assistance.

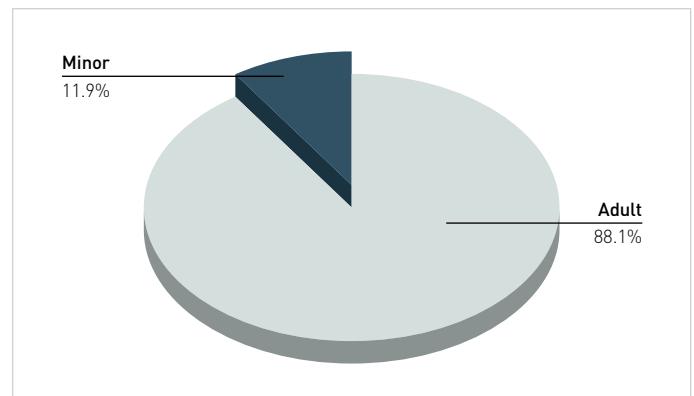
VICTIM DEMOGRAPHICS

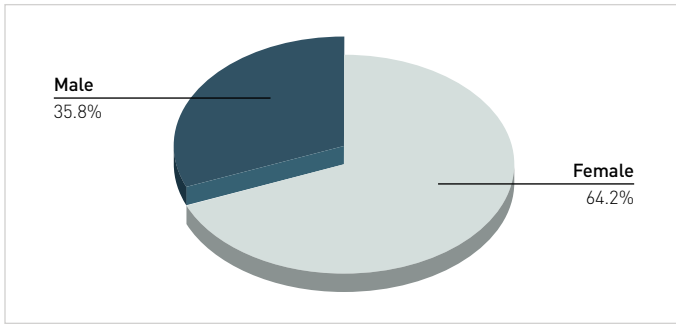
In 2023, the Hotline successfully identified and/or assisted 23 victims of human trafficking, six of whom entered A21's Aftercare Program. A21's Aftercare Program in Bulgaria aims to provide a trauma-informed, survivor-centred program to survivors of human trafficking. Since its establishment, A21's Aftercare Program has played a pivotal role in supporting numerous survivors on their path to recovery, many of whom were first identified and/or assisted by the Hotline. In 2023, A21 Bulgaria celebrated the graduation of two survivors from their program. As part of the program, these survivors received psychological support, legal advice, and regular attendance at the Freedom Centre.⁵ This holistic support proved instrumental in restoring their self-esteem, recognising their self-worth, and enhancing their skills and competencies. This restoration put them in a position where they could independently care for themselves and their families.

AGE AND GENDER

Cases involving potential female victims accounted for 64.2% of the total reported cases to the Hotline, while males formed the remaining 35.8%. This reflects a 15.6% increase since 2022, indicating a continued upward trend in the number of reported cases involving potential male victims, compared to the 6.9% recorded in 2020.

Although the Hotline experienced a 20.2% increase in cases involving minors compared to 2022, most reported cases in 2023 involved adults, accounting for 88.1% of Hotline cases.



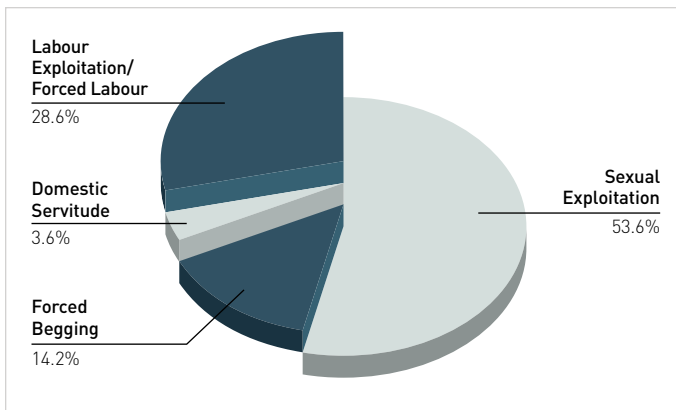


VICTIM NATIONALITY

In 2023, Bulgarian nationals comprised 78.3% of victims identified by the Hotline, with 20% of those Bulgarian national victims being of Roma ethnic origin. In contrast, in 2022, Bulgarian nationals comprised 89% of trafficking victims identified by the Hotline, with 11.1% being of Roma ethnicity, highlighting the increased vulnerability of the Roma community. While trafficking has been reported occurring within Bulgaria, victims reported to the Hotline have predominantly been Bulgarian nationals who have been trafficked internationally. Bulgaria has historically been identified as a source country, with its nationals often being trafficked outside of Bulgaria in neighbouring western countries, such as Germany and Austria.⁶ This trend continued into 2023 and is likely partly explained by the increase in unemployment rates in Bulgaria since 2022.⁷ Bulgarians seeking work elsewhere were then more susceptible to false job recruitment. Other nationalities reported to the Hotline included Romanian and Turkish.

EXPLOITATION TYPE

In 2023, labour and sexual exploitation continued to be the two most common types of exploitation reported to the Hotline, with over half of the victims identified/assisted by the Hotline experiencing sexual exploitation and 28.6% experiencing labour exploitation. Notably, there has been a significant increase in the number of victims of forced begging, from 8.6% in 2022 to 14.2% in 2023.



RECRUITMENT METHODS

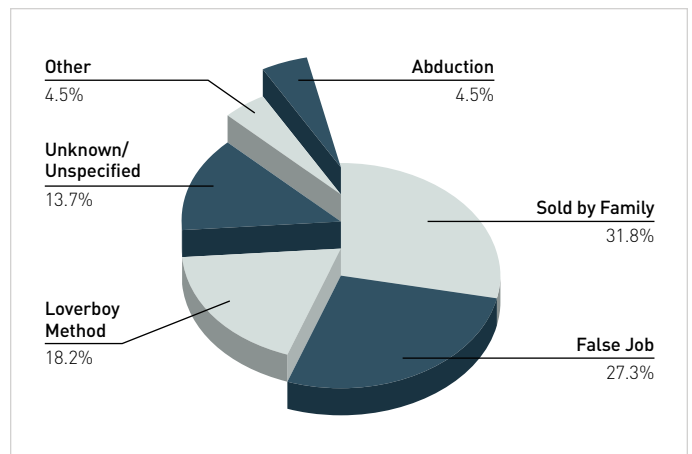
Perpetrators of human trafficking use various recruitment methods to deceive and coerce victims into situations of exploitation; these vary from the ‘loverboy’ method to false jobs and promises to being sold by a family member. Over the past year, the predominant recruitment method reported to the Hotline was ‘sold by family’, constituting 31.8% of cases. This marks a significant increase from 4% in 2022—a noteworthy

trend shift. In 2022, the primary recruitment method was through false job opportunities at 43.2%, which dropped to 27.3% in 2023. Another prevalent method is the ‘loverboy’ method, accounting for 18.2% of cases.

A21 Bulgaria’s efforts to publicise the Hotline’s number in Roma communities may have led to the emergence of this new trend. These communities, grappling with extreme poverty, face increased vulnerability. Specifically, some of these communities, and in particular the ‘Kalaydjii’ Roma community, practise the patriarchal custom of selling their teenage daughters as brides. Unfortunately, the girls subjected to this practice often become victims, either being trafficked or sexually violated directly by their husbands, and ultimately experiencing a form of modern-day slavery. Another area of this trend is the link between pick-pocketing and the Kardarashi tradition of marriage among the Roma—the more adept and skilful a woman is perceived to be, the more expensive a bride she will be. These Roma customs often force these women to steal or beg, and more commonly, as seen in the cases reported to the Hotline, these customs often place Roma women in such a vulnerable position that they are often sold for sexual exploitation by their husbands or another trafficker.

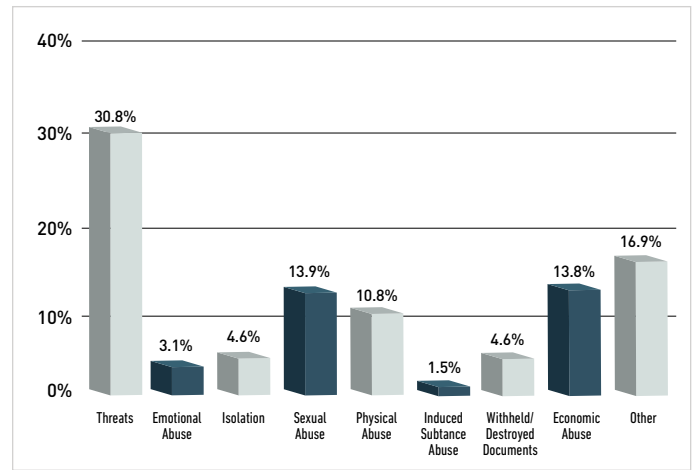
Of the human trafficking-related contacts to the Hotline in 2023, 13.5% involved a potential victim being groomed to be trafficked by the ‘loverboy’ method. Hotline call specialists intervened in each instance to prevent the continued exploitation of these potential victims. The work of the call specialists proved challenging as the potential victims believed they were deeply in love with their traffickers and struggled to acknowledge the risks associated with these romantic relationships. Most of these reports were provided to the Hotline by a concerned friend or family member of the potential victim.

In these scenarios, clear signs indicated that these individuals were at risk. A recurring pattern emerged. The initial connection was on social media, primarily Facebook, and the relationship rapidly developed. The ‘boyfriend’s’ jealousy then escalated quickly, leading to total control and isolation from loved ones. The potential victims received lavish gifts or substantial sums of money, prompting them to quit work or school and travel abroad with their ‘boyfriends’. The age range of potential victims varied from 18 to 32, all being women. As a result of reports to the Hotline and the Hotline’s immediate intervention, sometimes involving law enforcement collaboration, the majority of these vulnerable women were successfully prevented from leaving Bulgaria with the likely perpetrator.



METHODS OF CONTROL

To keep victims in exploitative situations, traffickers use diverse control tactics that include manipulation and coercion. The reported cases to the Hotline highlight methods of control such as threats,⁸ isolation,⁹ emotional, physical, sexual or economic¹⁰ abuse, forced substance misuse, and the deliberate destruction or withholding of personal identification documents. Often, victims of trafficking (VOTs) experience multiple methods of control to keep them in exploitative situations. In 2023, the Hotline observed threats as the most common method of control, involved in over 30% of cases; this included threats to the individual and their family and the threat of being reported to law enforcement. Other prevalent methods of control in 2023 included sexual (13.9%), physical (10.8%) and economic (13.8%) abuse.



HIGHLIGHTS

A21 AFTERCARE EMPOWERS WOMAN ESCAPING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Roza* spent countless time daydreaming about her future. When she was nearly 15, she was forced into an arranged marriage as a part of her Roma traditions. She moved to a small village where her husband and his family treated her as an object. She preoccupied herself with housework and taking care of her child, enduring mistreatment from her husband and growing resentful towards life as the years went by. Roza eventually found support from a man she met online. They began a relationship, and he promised to care for her and her child, giving Roza hope. After a few months, she arranged a time to meet him. He told her to leave her child at home as this was their first time together. When she arrived, the man who promised her the world locked her up in an apartment for a month without connection to the outside world. Drugs and alcohol surrounded her as he forced her to provide sexual services. Only the thought of her child prevented her from completely giving up. One night, she managed to escape and found a police officer. She explained her predicament and the officer connected her to services and a shelter. Just as she thought life was turning around, she discovered that her husband and his family informed social services that she had abandoned her child, resulting in her loss of parental rights. While she dreamed of reuniting with her child, she knew she needed to find a job. A21 financially supported her decision to start a cosmetology vocational training course. Roza diligently completed her training course and participated at the Freedom Centre. She spent time building trust-worthy relationships, receiving educational classes and counselling, and participating in A21 Life Programs. When prosecution against her trafficker commenced, she regularly travelled to testify, resulting in his conviction and imprisonment. Roza continued to work toward regaining her parental rights and eventually won them back. She can now provide for herself and her child and feels empowered to keep moving forward. She encourages other survivors, and her caseworker consistently recognises her resilience and bravery.



*Survivor name has been changed for their protection.



RAPID INTERVENTION BY THE HOTLINE LEADS TO RECOVERY

The Hotline in Bulgaria received a distress call from Ivan,* a male in his twenties who had fallen victim to human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Initially seeking employment in a major city in Bulgaria, Ivan had travelled from his small hometown to pursue work. Upon arrival, however, he was coerced into prostitution, facing threats and forced to wear women's clothing. The Hotline quickly obtained the victim's address and established contact with the local police, who successfully recovered Ivan within three hours of contacting the Hotline. Within the same day, he was reunited with his family and later reached out to the Hotline to confirm his safety. Currently, Ivan is working with the A21 Restore staff, who are supporting him in safely starting a new job.

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 network and partners across Bulgaria and throughout Europe to ensure that the collected data accurately reflects the current trafficking trends. The Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline welcomes new partners interested in counter-human trafficking efforts in Bulgaria and Europe. Partnerships are vital to provide services to identified trafficking survivors and to increase awareness about the services provided by the Bulgarian National Human Trafficking Hotline across Bulgaria.

080020100

Национална телефонна линия за борба с **трафика на хора**

info@080020100.bg

www.080020100.bg

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.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bulgaria." US Department of State, July 2022, www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/bulgaria. Accessed 5 Feb. 2024
- ² To ensure data integrity, the data presented is extracted from reports submitted to the 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 The *Can You See Me?* campaign is A21's global campaign intended to equip the general public on recognising human trafficking and reporting suspected trafficking to the country's relevant hotline. The real life scenarios depicted through the *CYSM?* campaign attempt to bring awareness of the millions of men, women and children currently trapped in modern day slavery across the world. By partnering with law enforcement, governments, businesses and NGOs, the goal is to turn awareness into action.
- ⁴ Walk for Freedom is a day of 'global awareness and local action' in the fight against human trafficking, where individuals engage their community through local walk events to raise awareness about human trafficking in their cities and collectively result in a ripple effect around the world.
- ⁵ A21's Freedom Centres are drop-in day centres, which serve as the primary avenue for survivors to receive direct case management support. They offer a safe place to meet with a caseworker, build community with other survivors, and access A21 aftercare services, which may include but are not limited to: Life Programs, job readiness and vocational training, language lessons, tutoring, cooking classes, creative activities, counselling and access to meals.
- ⁶ Group of Experts on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA). (2021). Evaluation Report, Bulgaria. Access to justice and effective remedies for victims of trafficking in human beings. Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/greta-evaluation-report-on-the-implementation-of-the-council-of-europe/1680a249f9>
- ⁷ OECD Economic Surveys: Bulgaria 2023. OECD iLibrary Logo. Retrieved February 27, 2024, from <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/5ca812a4-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/5ca812a4-en>
- ⁸ 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 government authorities.
- ⁹ Isolation may include physical isolation or deprivation of liberty, denying access to medical support, surveillance or control of the victim in public, and isolating them by moving them frequently from place to place.
- ¹⁰ Economic abuse includes situations of debt bondage or where traffickers limit the victim's finances either in whole or in part.