

**Title:**

“Once they pass you, they may be gone forever”: humanitarian duties and professional tensions in safeguarding and anti-trafficking at the border.

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**ABSTRACT**

Border crossings are considered sites of unique opportunity to identify and protect victims of trafficking. UK government reforms have given Border Officers new roles and responsibilities as humanitarian first responders. This paper explores how Border Officers reconcile this aspect of their work with their role as enforcers of immigration law and their increasingly militarised status as protectors of national sovereignty and security. Drawing on in-depth interviews with a specialised team of Safeguarding and Anti-trafficking (SAT) Officers at a UK airport, we identify the emergence of a distinct SAT subculture, characterised by a sense of moral purpose and moral community, and of doing difficult but meaningful and highly-skilled work that others are too indifferent, inexpert, or intimidated by to take on.

**Keywords: trafficking; safeguarding; border control; immigration; humanitarian**

Over the last decade, increased awareness of the extent and gravity of human trafficking has turned global attention to the development of robust anti-trafficking strategies. These typically highlight borders as sites of unique opportunity for states to intervene to prevent trafficking (European Commission 2012; European Union 2014; International Organisation for Migration 2005) and emphasise the crucial role of border officials in victim identification and protection (The Centre for Social Justice 2015; European Migration Network 2014; Frontex 2012: 7; Eurojust 2012). The UK government’s Modern Slavery Strategy (HM Government 2014) reiterates the emphasis on cross-border trafficking – now codified in the 2015 Modern Slavery Act – and transposes from the EU Directive into UK legislation the duty of state agencies, including border forces, to take proactive measures to identify victims. It also provides for the establishment of specialist anti-trafficking and safeguarding (SAT) units, staffed by UK Border Force (UKBF) officers at British border crossings.

These changes have come during an era of flux for UKBF. The subject of persistent political and public scrutiny, the functions of border and immigration control have been reimagined and restructured frequently within government departments since the 1990s. Notably, the establishment of the UK Border Agency in 2008 saw the merging of customs and immigration and the conscious alignment of border work with law enforcement. This process was accelerated in 2012 when UKBF was split from the now defunct Border Agency amid accusations of mismanagement and reports that immigration rules had been abandoned and border checks relaxed in efforts to deal with bottlenecks of passengers (BBC 2012). Announcing the restructure, the Home Secretary, Theresa May declared that the new UKBF would need ‘a whole new management culture’ and ‘its own ethos of law enforcement’ (HC Deb (2010-12) 20 February vol. 540 c. 623). Accordingly, the *Border Agency* was re-launched as a *Border Force*, re-conceptualising it from civil service agency to ‘law-enforcement command’ with uniforms, weapons, and powers of arrest to match. These changes involved broadening the scope of the ‘border officer’ to cover both the crime-fighting aspects of customs enforcement and the more ‘compassionate’, person-centred aspects of immigration control, resulting in the retraining of thousands of officers to deal with this new dual aspect of their roles.

While those calling for a victim-centred, human rights-based approach to combatting trafficking have welcomed the new priority given to this issue by the UK government, some have also criticised the Modern Slavery Act for taking an approach ‘that is deeply embedded in a criminal law and border control frameworks’ (Fudge 2015: para 5) whilst doing little to address issues related to labour standards and supply chains (Craig 2015). Similarly, questions have been raised about the strength of the government’s commitment to protecting victims, with advocacy groups suggesting that the legislation sets the threshold for evidence of coercion or intent to exploit too high (Harrison 2015). The Act comes at a time when the political rhetoric around restricting movement across borders has seldom been so fervent, and it has been argued that current immigration policies make the state culpable in creating vulnerability and posing a threat to human wellbeing and to migrants’ rights (O’Connell Davidson and Howard 2015; Dembour and Kelly 2011). The argument that global anti-trafficking efforts are constrained and undermined by the adherence to rigid immigration enforcement has become a staple feature of the debate about the policing of international borders (Aas and Gundhus 2015; Chuang 2014; Dembour and Kelly 2011; Weber and Pickering 2011; Chacón 2010).

Empirical studies have tended to prioritise the experiences and narratives of victims moving between borders (Campbell 2013; Brunovskis and Surtees 2012). This has enriched scholarly understanding of how such measures are experienced by those they aim to help. But our understanding of the factors shaping anti-trafficking responses at the border is incomplete without an examination of the perspectives and experiences of those responsible for enacting them (Loftus 2015). Recent years have seen some efforts to close this gap, with illuminating ethnographic research into the practices of the EU border agency Frontex (Aas and Gundhus 2015) and the Australian border force (Pickering and Ham 2014). These studies have focused on frontline officers, revealing their attitudes towards the humanitarian aspects of their work as well as the policy and legal imperatives that direct it. They highlight the tension between humanitarian perspectives and other elements of border force ‘culture’, such as the objective to combat organised crime, make dispassionate immigration decisions, and use decision-making frameworks that rely on ‘strict binaries’ when judging potential victims or agents (Pickering and Ham 2014: 16). Such findings resonate with studies of the occupational cultures of other criminal justice practitioners – most notably the police service, which has been described as struggling with reconciling conceptions of ‘proper’ crime-fighting police work with a trend towards the adoption of duties traditionally associated with social work (Aas and Gundhus 2014; Loftus 2010). Indeed, anti-trafficking has been identified as one area of police work that requires both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ policing skills, with versatility in switching between the two a core competence (Van Dyke 2014).

This paper contributes to that body of empirical research, reporting on findings from a study involving a specialist Safeguarding and Anti-trafficking (SAT) unit within the UK Border Force at London’s Heathrow airport. Our investigation reveals how organisational and structural shifts in safeguarding and anti-trafficking work are combining to create a SAT subculture within the Border Force. It argues that this subculture is characterised by a sense of moral purpose and moral community, and of doing difficult but meaningful and highly-skilled work that others are too indifferent, inexpert, or intimidated by to take on. We find that SAT officers are deeply committed to their work and are rewarded both personally and professionally for their efforts through a sense of job satisfaction and promises of career advancement.

We explore the strategies BFOs develop to discharge their newly-acquired humanitarian duties in a context in which their legal powers and practical ability to help are constrained. Our identification of the SAT subculture underlines the tensions between SAT

work that is embedded in a humanitarian agenda and the apparently conflicting pressures to control immigration through robust policing of the border. This tension is found in officers' accounts of both their immigration and safeguarding work – not only in relation to the challenges they face in making appropriate decisions about individual cases, but also in their own attitudes towards these dual aspects of their jobs and the organisational response to their endeavours. We identify attempts by UKBF to resolve the conflict between the fulfilment of humanitarian duties and the pursuit of immigration control, but also suggest that developments are in some respects being undermined by a simultaneous push to make border control a law enforcement exercise.

We argue that the humanitarian border control agenda has not only been embraced wholeheartedly by SAT officers, but that it is also prioritized by them (to the extent possible given constraints on their powers) over immigration concerns. Nevertheless, we also assert that the keen sense of moral purpose described by SAT officers stands in contrast to what is in reality a very limited power to protect people from exploitation.

*Methodology: privileging the accounts of border force officers*

Our aim is to explore how the newly-adopted anti-trafficking agenda is enacted, viewed, and experienced by those responsible for its implementation on the ground – a perspective that has been given scant attention by researchers previously. With this in mind, it was important to recruit from a border crossing point that had already made significant efforts towards implementation of that agenda.

The UK's Heathrow airport – one of the world's busiest airports – was an ideal candidate. It serves a number of known trafficking routes,<sup>1</sup> making opportunities to identify and protect victims of trafficking<sup>2</sup> unlikely to be significantly greater at any other port. Heathrow SAT teams are among the most well-resourced and well-trained in the UK, and have

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<sup>1</sup> Traffickers are believed to often prefer air travel routes as these are often the cheapest means of travel (FRA 2014).

<sup>2</sup> While we are sensitive to the controversies about how best to describe people identified at borders as victims or potential victims of trafficking, given the loaded nature of the terms 'victim' (Broad 2015; Walklate 2007), and 'potential', it is not necessary to take a stance on them, much less to rehearse them here. For the purposes of this paper we report and follow UKBF practice, without subjecting it to critical analysis.

been cited by other airports as a model of best practice.<sup>3</sup> This indicates that they have developed innovative and practicable ways of accommodating their humanitarian aims with their immigration-control functions on the ground. The participating team in this study had been in place for over a year, long enough to have developed its own culture and for its members to be able to reflect on how their SAT role has affected the way they conceptualise and feel about their work. For these reasons, a study of the Heathrow SAT team also promised to be a valuable gauge of the general direction of SAT work at airports in the UK as well as an early indicator of issues likely to become more prominent (and politically pressing) in the future.

The Heathrow SAT team had been preceded by discrete Child and Youth Protection (CYP) teams and this foundation has proven to be significant for this study. A number of BFOs had moved into the SAT team from the previous CYP teams and, perhaps for this reason, their motivation was frequently described in the relatively narrow terms of protecting children and young people.

At the time of this study, BFOs applied for a SAT role on a voluntary basis, although selection involved a competitive recruitment process. This became a key point of discussion in interviews, and meant that Heathrow SAT officers differed from non-SAT officers in notable ways. Although all BFOs received basic e-training on SAT issues and were obliged to look out for vulnerable people at border control, SAT officers received extra training and shouldered additional SAT-related duties. At the time of this study, the specialist training consisted of a 4-day course, which, in addition to providing instructions on how to identify and help a potential victim of trafficking (PVOT), educated officers about the different kinds of victims and refuted popular myths about trafficking.<sup>4</sup> The SAT-specific duties included floor-walking – pacing the space behind border control points and scanning incoming passengers for indications of vulnerability – dealing with safeguarding or trafficking referrals from other officers; interviewing, investigating, and caring for suspected victims; making enquiries and engaging with external agencies including embassies, social services and the police; and, depending on their level of seniority, recommending or authorising an action (e.g. to return an individual to

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<sup>3</sup> Heathrow's SAT strategy includes: basic training for all officers; a 15-strong dedicated SAT team who attend a specialist 4-day training course; regular liaison meetings with local social services to discuss cooperation and issues of mutual concern; anti-trafficking 'operations' targeting routes and profiles of passengers thought to be used by victims; and a dedicated SAT intelligence officer, amongst other things.

<sup>4</sup> UK Border Force 'Safeguarding and Trafficking Awareness Training for Higher Officers' Powerpoint presentation training materials provided to the authors by Heathrow SAT team Higher Officer.

their country of origin or to refer an individual as a PVOT to a programme of assistance via the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 of the 15 BFOs on the SAT team and one officer who was not SAT trained in May 2015, on-site at Heathrow Airport. Interviews typically lasted for 60 to 90 minutes. The officers we spoke to ranged in seniority and experience, as detailed in Table 1.

#### **TABLE 1 HERE**

This exploratory study focuses on privileging the accounts of officers' experiences of SAT work at the border, and as such it was influenced in part by the narrative tradition in social research. Questions were minimal, open-ended and designed to elicit personal attitudes, opinions, feelings, and experiences. In order to allow issues to emerge as and when they arose in the minds of interviewees, we avoided questions that directly referred to humanitarianism or human rights, or to conflicts, inconsistencies or ethical dilemmas. We did, however, ask BFOs directly to talk about the most challenging aspects of their work, a line of questioning which typically prompted responses that related both to the practical difficulties of SAT work and its emotional toll.

Recently, Loftus (2015) has appealed for more research into the practices and occupational cultures of border policing, calling in particular for further ethnographic studies. We concur that our own research would have benefited from the addition of ethnographic observations, which would have allowed insight into the 'inner life' and 'daily grind' of the SAT team (Loftus 2015: 122). However, neither the budget nor time afforded by the wider project<sup>5</sup> of which this research comprised a small part permitted this kind of fieldwork. Accordingly, the extent to which we are able to compare how participants described their SAT work and how they enacted that role in practice is inevitably limited. Similarly, it should be noted that our sample size is small and we were concerned with officers with SAT training. We did not seek the perspective of those who do not participate in SAT work or to corroborate the views of officers we interviewed.

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<sup>5</sup> A 3-year European Commission-funded project investigating the ethical, legal and efficiency aspects of surveillance used to combat organized crime: [www.surveille.eu](http://www.surveille.eu).

### *Revealing a SAT subculture*

In what follows, we conceptualise safeguarding and trafficking work as an example of a distinct BFO subculture. Occupational cultures are developed through the shared experiences and occupational backgrounds of organisational members, and include the presence of common training, mutual support and associated values and norms (Johnson, Chye Koh and Killough 2009). Within these occupations, groups may form subcultures, providing a way for the group to function, react, adapt and integrate new members (Mawby and Worrall 2013). The dearth of studies into border police cultures has already been noted and there is a distinct lack of comprehensive research and literature on the occupational cultures of criminal justice practitioners more generally (Mawby and Worrall 2013). Here, we describe how the SAT team subculture, by virtue of its voluntary membership, allows for the furthering of a particular (humanitarian) agenda by committed officers whilst giving an ‘opt out’ to those who wish to dissent.

#### *SAT work: humanitarian, voluntary and specialised.*

SAT officers reported sharing a deep personal and professional commitment to fulfilling what they saw as their humanitarian duties, perceiving themselves as members of a distinctly moral rather than merely a professional community. The majority of the BFOs we spoke to described their SAT work in clearly humanitarian terms, using phrases such as ‘helping people’ [P7], ensuring they are ‘cared for’, ‘protecting’ them ‘from harm’ [P1]; and ‘saving’ them [P8]. While a role on the SAT team was considered a useful career move, most of the BFOs we spoke to explained their motivation as a recognition of their basic human duties to help others in need, rather than by a desire to get ahead professionally:

*Okay, I would like to say it's a job but it isn't. I have a responsibility. It's just human. I'm that character where, basically, if I identify a person in need, you want to help that person. Yeah, so essentially, whether they're a child or an adult, you will help that person. It's more the human factor.[P4]*

*[I]f I can help any child, any adult, who is in danger coming in the country, I take that seriously, yeah. ... it's something that...yeah, it's my first priority, I love it. [P6]*

The voluntary nature of SAT team membership meant that only those BFOs who had ‘opted in’ to the humanitarian aspects of the border control policy were required to implement them on the ground. The rationale for making the SAT role both voluntary and selective was explained as reflecting the importance given to the SAT agenda. Specifically, officers felt the process made it more likely that only those who ‘care’, ‘are committed’, ‘want to make a difference or do it well’ and have ‘crucial skills’ of ‘communication’ and ‘strength’ are entrusted with SAT responsibilities [P8]. As is expanded on below, this combination of moral motivations and specialist skills is what characterises SAT subculture.

All but one of the BFO participants expressed strong identification with and commitment to the SAT agenda. However, when placed in the context of border guarding more broadly, they presented it as a side-line to core activity, engaged with by a select but dedicated few. This development of SAT work as a specialised rather than mainstream area of BFO work may reflect the recent drive to make UKBF more like a police force. Nevertheless, perhaps in recognition of the different skills, experience, and interests of staff, SAT work was one of a range of important functions that were voluntary.

There was an acceptance among our (SAT-trained) participants that their colleagues had entered the force through various routes and may be motivated by a commitment to different aspects of the role, which did not necessarily align with their own beliefs in a humanitarian agenda. For example, there was a general recognition amongst our participants that some BFOs chose not to volunteer for the SAT role because they ‘couldn’t care less [about safeguarding and anti-trafficking]’ [P8]. But they also reported that ‘there is a lot of fear’ about the extra responsibility that comes with the SAT role [P7] and apprehension about the ‘emotionally unsettling’ nature of the interactions SAT officers have with the people they are trying to help [P8]. This points to clear distinctions being made between the possible ways of conceptualising and indeed fulfilling the BFO role, with SAT work being only one option.

These emerging findings tally with those of Aas and Gundhus’s study of border officers’ attitudes to the humanitarian aspects of their work in the context of secondments from national border agencies to Frontex, the EU border agency. That study revealed that there ‘seem to exist pronounced distinctions within Frontex with regard to how individual officers see their role’ and that ‘rather than dealing with a single organizational culture, Frontex functions as a patchwork of policing sub-cultures, which the organization is using considerable efforts to unite through training, guidelines and supervision’ (Aas and Gundhus 2015: 7). While Frontex

subcultures were described as correlating with national cultures, the Heathrow SAT subculture seems to correlate in parts with professional background, training, and personal inclinations towards helping the vulnerable. Thus, in a mixture similar to that described in Van Dyke's study of a UK police anti-trafficking unit (Van Dyke 2014: 9), the skills and attitudes contributing to the development of the subculture are thus provided by the incumbent SAT team and 'brought in' by individuals joining the team.

In contrast to their descriptions of their colleagues, the SAT-trained BFOs we spoke to seemed to consider the fulfilment of humanitarian goals (in the form of SAT work) to be *as much* a part of their professional identity as their role in securing the border. For example, nearly all of our participants reported that they would always act on SAT indicators even if treating the individual as an immigration case (which SAT cases often also are) would be the expeditious option: 'I don't care how busy it is... I'd always make the referral' [P3]. This makes them quite different participants to BFOs whose humanitarian duties have been foisted upon them, either by policy or circumstance,<sup>6</sup> or who for other reasons question the appropriateness of giving those responsible for the enforcement of immigration law duties that are explicitly humanitarian (see Aas & Gundhus 2015).

What appears distinctive about the Heathrow SAT team – and different to the Frontex study – is the professionalization and specialisation of this humanitarian aspect of border work and, as is discussed later, the heightened recognition of its value. Making it a voluntary, specialist activity can be seen as one approach to addressing the tensions inherent in a brief that includes both excluding people and protecting them. BFOs in the UK have been criticized for prioritizing the deportation of illegal migrants over the identification of victims of trafficking, leading to misidentifications of the latter as the former (The Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group 2012).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, The Centre for Social Justice (2013) called for the UK Border Agency (as it was at the time) to be stripped of its Competent Authority status as its practices were seen as incompatible with the protection of trafficking victims. Participants in our study acknowledged the fairness of this criticism, reporting the difficulty for BFOs of having both immigration control and SAT duties at the forefront of their minds simultaneously, and stating

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Aas and Gundhus's (2015) work described BFOs working at unofficial border crossings, in remote areas or at sea, who find themselves in situations in which they are faced with people in need of basic help to survive, such as water or food.

<sup>7</sup> The UNODC (2008: 9) also points out this risk in their report on human trafficking: 'An unintended consequence of efforts directed principally at illegal migration can be the misidentification and inadvertent re-victimization of trafficked persons'. For a discussion of this issue in the media see Rhys Jones (2013).

that the default tendency, especially of untrained BFOs, is to prioritise their immigration function:

*...a lot of the officers here see things only purely in black and white; in other words, it's an immigration issue, it's not a safeguarding issue. It's only when SAT officers intervene or say, like, no, this fits the profile that we can intervene. [P4]*

*...it is hard, especially for other officers that haven't had the training. Because our first priority is, you've got your immigration hat on first really, and that's always...that's our way of thinking. [P1]*

Indeed, previous studies have pointed out the dichotomy of having border authorities with the simultaneous role of keeping people out whilst also being in charge of the safety of the vulnerable (Aas and Gundhus 2015; Weber and Pickering 2011; Pickering 2011). Focusing the humanitarian task on a dedicated few could relieve this tension, particularly where the desire of some officers to 'outsource' this aspect of their work is apparent.

Our study suggests the Border Force at Heathrow airport is making a concerted effort to separate out the tasks of immigration control and SAT work. This is exemplified by the role of 'floor-walkers'. Floor-walkers are SAT-trained officers who pace the space behind the border control desks, scanning incoming passengers for signs of vulnerability and pulling them out of line for further investigation. BFOs reported that their ability to detect such signs was a result of training and regular updates from the Intel team on PVOT profiles.<sup>8</sup> Floor-walking is used to implement profiles of high-risk routes and passengers, developed by the SAT intelligence unit as well as to monitor incoming flights routinely. While a number of the SAT officers we spoke to said they believed that all BFOs were trained sufficiently well to identify PVOTs, irrespective of whether they had attended the specialist SAT course, they saw floor-walking as an opportunity to be more attentive to signs of vulnerability, without the interference of immigration control considerations and pressures of traveller flow [P2; P3]. Floor-walkers act in a SAT capacity exclusively for the duration of their shift – intervening in the border

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<sup>8</sup> Unlike the findings of a 2007 study examining the basis for immigration decisions at 2 UK airports including Heathrow, in which instinct featured as a theme in participants' reports of the way illegal migrants and PVOTS were identified (Woodfield *et al* 2007)

control work of colleagues staffing the desks and potentially overriding their immigration decisions when they identify a possible issue of concern:

*So if I'm walking on the floor and I'll just be listening in to conversations, that's when I'll purely be thinking, you know, is that individual being trafficked in, as opposed to do they qualify for entry under immigration legislation. So yeah, it's a lot easier. Plus you have time to look at the queue, to spot anything that you...you know, any individuals that you want to see and check out. And then you just follow them to the desk and you can listen in from there. [P1]*

Floor-walking is also used as part of special operations to profile travellers on routes identified as favoured by traffickers. Unlike non-SAT trained BFOs, who receive email updates about ongoing operations but may choose not to read or engage with them, SAT officers are regularly updated on the indicators relating to specific kinds of trafficking and play an active part in informing and developing internal anti-trafficking operations:

*At the moment, we've got Operation X which is Bangladeshi females who are entering into forced marriages because they've got henna patterns and they have the initials of their husband. We encountered a 12 year old who was married to her cousin. And that's where it came about because we identified one person and then it comes on to say, you know, maybe we should be a bit more vigilant around Bangladeshi females. ... For example, the Dubai flights bring in a lot of Bangladeshis...so we're going to be floor-walking behind. [P1]*

We asked some participants how effective floor-walking is, but most felt unable to answer with confidence. It was reported to us by two participants that a recent special operation had yielded no PVOT identifications, a fact which surprised them. Nevertheless, the introduction of floor walking presents a noteworthy attempt by UKBF to address the conflict between immigration control and SAT work by creating a division of labour. However, at the time of the study, the presence of floor-walkers was 'subject to business needs' [P7], meaning they were not authorised when the airport was busy and personnel were all deployed on the control desk.

While floor-walking was described by some officers as a welcome opportunity to focus on SAT work, others recognised that it could be perceived negatively by their colleagues, if seen as intervening in their work or undermining their judgement. One junior BFO expressed a reluctance to floor-walk for this reason:

*I wouldn't want to be undermining my colleagues, thinking that they don't know what a potential victim of trafficking is, when they probably do. We should all be able to pick up on things that aren't right.' [P3].*

All BFOs we spoke to agreed that the identification of vulnerable individuals was a basic duty of *all* border officers. Most also thought the specialist SAT training should be rolled out across the Force, though the reasons they cited in support of this varied. The training had recently become compulsory for all senior officers, and some BFOs claimed this had improved greatly the extent to which they felt supported and recognized in their work. Some reported having previously felt overburdened with responsibility on occasions when their non-SAT trained superiors deferred to them to authorise official designations of vulnerable individuals [P4]. Superiors were also described as more supportive when it came to dealing with mistakes or complaints once they had received the SAT training [P8]. In relation to new recruits and existing staff, most BFOs we spoke to supported universal training as a means of 'raising awareness' about SAT issues, which they described as often poor amongst BFOs (reflecting Pickering and Ham's Australian findings, 2014: 8) and improve the chances of identifying PVOTs:

*Personally, I think all Border Force Officers should have that training, not just a team, because it's not every day we're going to be around for advising our colleagues. ... If all officers were trained to do that, we would be able to identify a little bit more who's being trafficked or smuggled through here each day. [P6]*

However, none of our participants felt that the responsibility to deal with PVOTs once they had been identified—a task currently only shouldered by SAT officers—should become mandatory for all BFOs. At first glance this exception might seem inconsistent with the existence of a mandatory responsibility to deal with illegal migrants and asylum seekers: after all, many if not most asylum seekers are also vulnerable people and BFOs are not permitted to opt out of dealing with them. Yet, there may be practical reasons relating to the difficulty of ensuring BFOs pursue SAT aims in the face of competing immigration concerns. Unlike the processing of asylum seekers, which is a standardized, bureaucratic procedure, the safeguarding and protection of children and PVOTs requires a significant exercise of discretion, communication skills, emotional resilience and devotion of time and effort. While asylum seekers generally self-present, it is up to BFOs to identify vulnerable children and PVOTs and to decide when to take measures to protect them. In light of this, it is perhaps

unsurprising that motivation, commitment, and specific skills are seen as prerequisites for the role.

*SAT subculture: moral community, moral responsibility, and social work.*

Perhaps the single most defining characteristic of the SAT subculture is a shared commitment to the moral cause of helping vulnerable people. SAT work clearly fosters a strong sense of moral community among the members of the SAT team. This was evident in the way team members described each other and the team as a whole:

*Everyone on the team wants to help these people, wants to make a difference. [P7]*

*I think we're very passionate about what we do here. We have a very, very dedicated and committed team and we're very, very proud of the work they do here.' [HO2, p.17]*

*That's the thing, that's the beauty of the team as well, we do help each other...Because it's always the passengers' interests we have at heart, and that's the most important thing. We want to make the right decision. So as a team, we pull together and do that.'*  
[SAT4, pp.12-13]

This language of the moral community is seen as a problematic example of 'humanitarian government' by some observers (Aas and Gundhus 2015; Fassin 2011). They argue that the deployment of moral sentiments of compassion, empathy and assistance distracts from meaningful discussions about injustice and rights, leaving those charged with 'helping' with the illusion that solidarity has redeeming powers (Aas and Gundhus 2015; Fassin 2011).

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to dismiss the role undertaken by BFOs participating in this study as merely a self-serving practice in empathy – officers reported becoming deeply and practically involved in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of potential victims. They relayed incidents demonstrating that their personal commitment to the SAT cause went above and beyond merely fulfilling professional duties, thus reflecting the commitment to 'go the extra mile' (Van Dyke 2014: 8). For example, one BFO described going to great lengths to gather intelligence about the fate awaiting PVOTs in their care, such as investigating whether potential employers had a history of exploiting workers or were linked to other companies that did. Others described doing significant unpaid overtime to see a case through:

*[T]here was one case where I think I was coming off my night shift ...and this man came in with his child. And I said to him (so on the desk now, the officer) I said to him, well, take a seat, I'm going to make some checks. Within that time span, the child disappeared. ... So I went down to speak to the father and I goes, where's your child? "I don't know, he's somewhere around". ...The father had no concern about the child at all. ... His child is just wandering around- "he's bored, he was waiting too long, so he just wandered about". My God, the child is five years old, this is the child's first time in the UK! ... And I was upset. And everybody kept on saying, the senior officers kept saying to me, "will you go home?" I said, I'm not going home until this child is found. And I did stay until that child was found. [P9]*

In relation to children in particular, BFOs reported voluntarily undertaking safeguarding measures that they felt had not been sufficiently carried out by social services. These included making phone calls to find out if sponsors were reliable and safe; physically accompanying children to the car sent by local authorities to collect them; and reassuring children about the care provided by those authorities. Some participants described resisting and challenging what they saw as examples of unsatisfactory levels of care and protection offered by children's services. One BFO reported doing extra checks on family sponsors of an arriving child, revealing the sponsor to be what the BFO considered an unsuitable carer. The officer claimed that sometimes social services would accept care by a relative to be appropriate and safe without considering in-depth checks to be necessary:

*'I really do believe that with social services, as long as that child/adult has family, I think they think it's fine. Not realising, no, it's not fine. I mean, all the cases out there that they have that children have died, you know, they should realise that, [but] no. But they don't.' [P9]*

Frustration with the perceived indifference of social workers and their reluctance to take responsibility for the wellbeing of children was a recurring theme of the interviews:

*...there was one case where, basically, I had to liaise between two social services and ask them, somebody take responsibility of this child, I've identified this child in need, it's [the local authority's] ultimate responsibility because they're here and they're paid extra for that. But they didn't want to take notice because that child had previously lived in another [local authority] and they're saying that is the other [local authority's] thingy. But I had to liaise between the two. [P1]*

As this illustrates, SAT officers see themselves as not only taking on some of the sensitive and challenging aspects of BFO work that other BFOs do not want to engage in, but also as picking up the slack for (perceived) negligent or indifferent social workers.

While a number of BFOs we spoke to expressed dissatisfaction with the performance of social services in relation to their SAT duties, some also described affinities with social workers, especially in terms of the emotional and psychological toll of their work. For example, one BFO mentioned asking to be removed from the team when things became too stressful and upsetting:

*It's like social workers, you see some really bad things and then you get a bit disillusioned, so you want to just take a step back from it. And that is what happens sometimes here...And I will say for myself, it has happened because I've had to deal with some things and I'm thinking that is too much. [P4]*

In another case a BFO described asking to step down from the SAT team after it transpired that an individual they granted access to had gone on to be exploited. What was framed as the *fear* of the 'social work' aspects of SAT work – including the moral and professional responsibility – were cited as reasons why some BFOs may choose not to volunteer for the role:

*I think people may be a little bit scared of the SAT team because it's quite...you're responsible, it's quite a massive responsibility when you're dealing with vulnerable people. You know, you need to make sure you're putting the right measures in place and you've got to be quite sensitive. I'm not saying insensitive people aren't applying but I think it's quite...some people might get emotionally involved and don't want to. [P5]*

*And the potential, as I said earlier, if you've let a child go and then you find out something bad happened to them, to have that come back to you would haunt you. I know it would me, I'd think exactly that, if I found out that I had let a child go through, or even an adult, and I was responsible, I was the last person that person saw before going on to something horrible, I would feel horrendous. And I think that's what most people were telling me when I first joined the team, I shouldn't have joined the team for that reason. But then my reasons were, well, I want to try and help them, as opposed to thinking about my own back. But yeah, I think there is a lot of fear. [P7]*

While participants were only speculating on the reasons why others may not volunteer for SAT work, it is striking that *fear of responsibility* and *consequence* were cited rather than the association between the Border Force and ‘soft’ social work somehow undermining the ‘masculine’ role of border policing. Loftus’ (2010) well-cited ethnography of police culture identified this tension between ‘soft’ and ‘masculine’ work in relation to the police service in England. Over the last decade there has been significant expansion of the traditional police role into the domain of more ‘caring’ social work-type roles –a process that has come to be known as ‘wide policing’ (Millie 2013: 149). Loftus’s work indicates that, despite these changes, police officers continued to be keen to distance themselves from social workers, and to contrast fighting crime and locking people up, which they saw as ‘real’ police work, with what was described by one police officer as the ‘mollycoddling’ of social work (Loftus 2010: 5).

Our findings suggest that with respect to the elevation of ‘masculine’, law-enforcement practices over ‘soft’, caring ones, the SAT subculture does not emulate police culture as closely as may have been expected. On the contrary, some of the newly-introduced police-like elements of the BFO image, such as the police-style uniforms, were seen by participants as intentionally ‘intimidating’ [P7 and P9] and as frustratingly *unhelpful* to BFOs trying to carry out SAT work [P9]<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, this view must be balanced with the apparent political desire to foster ‘a tough law enforcement culture’<sup>10</sup> within UKBF that actively encourages the recruitment of ex-military and police personnel (Border Force 2014). Once again this illustrates the tensions and mixed messages resulting from the recent organisational recasting of BFOs as both enforcers of border security and protectors of vulnerable people.

#### *What SAT work gives back: rewards both personal and professional*

While there are undoubtedly a range of reasons for the greater openness to social work-type roles amongst BFOs as compared to the police, it is notable that SAT work was reported as being prioritised and valued by UKBF and the management at Heathrow airport. For those BFOs who had previously been involved in the CYP teams, this new emphasis on SAT work

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<sup>9</sup> The darker colour of the new UKBF uniforms unveiled in 2014 was noted in the press and linked to studies suggesting they increased citizens’ perceptions of officers as aggressive (Leitch 2014).

<sup>10</sup> This phrase was used by the interim Director General, Immigration Enforcement Directorate in evidence given to the Home Affairs Committee in 2013 (Home Affairs Committee 2013-14, Ev 13).

was welcomed, and seen as giving overdue professional recognition to previously undervalued efforts:

*So what I like about this is that ...it's recognised at all levels that we are doing important work and we are getting congratulated, recognised. You know, it's there, there's that appreciation that yes, you are doing a good job and stuff. [P4]*

By way of contrast, other immigration-related aspects of BFO work were seen as involving less complex and valuable skills and therefore less deserving of praise:

*And we say now that there's a lot more kudos in protecting someone who's vulnerable than getting someone refused because they've got a forged passport. And so that is changing, I think, a little. Because we used to have whiteboards: 'Officer so and so's got so many forgeries'. And it's like well, hang on, finding a forgery, anyone can find a forgery once you've been on a forgery course, you know. You've got to have your wits about you to identify those little indicators that [a PVOT] is there. [P3]*

This participant did not elaborate on the reasons why they believe indicators of trafficking are considered more difficult to spot than those of forgery. However, many of the initial indicators of trafficking also signal intent to migrate illegally – for example, carrying forged documents. Distinguishing between an illegal migrant and a PVOT therefore requires BFOs to be attentive to the presence of additional indicators suggestive of trafficking. A further reason may be that the variation in trafficking cases is far more diverse than that in false passports, a fact that is reflected in the training documents for frontline staff on forgery (Home Office, 2014a) and trafficking (Home Office, 2014b). The above quote suggests that, as well as providing encouragement and recognition to BFOs already committed to the SAT cause, the professionalization of SAT work is being used to encourage new recruits to the SAT team, through an enticing mix of moral purpose and the promise of career advancement.

Beyond professional recognition, BFOs also reported gaining great personal rewards from SAT work. Indeed, our participants were keen to point out that despite the frustrations and emotional strains of the job the rewards were a powerful incentive. One SAT officer described the personal impact of a successful outcome to an anti-trafficking investigation involving two girls trafficked into the UK for the purposes of sexual exploitation:

*[It was] the best day of my life, I remember it, it was the [date given] ... I had a phone call from [name of airport] Intel. ... they were travelling again as imposters on forged*

*documents, going to Spain. One girl was stopped by the Spanish authorities and she was removed back to [name of airport]. So that's when we had everyone go and meet her because we've got a viable victim who's been trafficked twice. ... One girl ... I can't talk a lot about her but she's safe. We know where she is, she's safe. And we're hoping that she will give evidence against [name of trafficker] when she's extradited. The other girl, she's in the UK and she's gone through the NRM process obviously, she was granted. She was helping the police with their enquiries because she was giving evidence in court. And she's got leave to be here in the UK. [P3]*

Others contrasted the considerable personal rewards they received from SAT work with the relatively poor rewards of immigration control, perhaps revealing a latent ambivalence about the value of their work as BFOs more generally:

*...it's one of the few areas actually of work, I think, where you can actually feel a tangible reward. It's not very rewarding refusing people and sending them home. You know. Even though that's your job, it's not a really positive thing, is it? Especially when somebody's spent their entire life savings. But if you've saved somebody from prostitution, domestic servitude, working on a beach picking cockles, actually that's a pretty big thing, I think, for me. ... It's very rewarding ... [P8]*

Notable in this quote is the contrast between the description of immigration work as an unrewarding task that nevertheless has to be done, and the almost heroic rewards of SAT work. Of significance also is the contrast between the great sense of responsibility expressed by BFOs in relation to the fate of PVOTs, and the lack of an equivalent sense of responsibility for the fate of non-PVOT migrants. This discrepancy may reflect the relative lack of discretion afforded BFOs in relation to immigration cases as compared to SAT cases.

#### *Rationalising SAT outcomes: from moral responsibility to shifting the burden*

BFOs discussed different strategies for discharging their moral responsibilities, in a situation in which the vast majority of those identified as PVOTs refuse offers of help through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). One BFO reported trying to gather as much evidence as possible (from police databases, calls to visa-sponsors to establish credentials, scrutiny of nominated employers) about the PVOT's impending exploitation to present to the individual

to enable them to make an informed, and therefore more autonomous, decision about whether to accept help:

*I mean, we do try and tell the passenger as much as possible about where they're going because they have to make an informed decision as to whether or not they want to be part of the NRM process. So we have to...we try to convey to them how dire the situation could be, make sure that the decision is theirs. Because we're not the moral police, we can't tell you if you're going to be okay, but we have concerns and if you want, we can facilitate your return home. If that person decides no, I'd rather take the risk, then that's their burden as opposed to our burden ... [P7]*

This line of argument reveals the BFO's belief that they are discharging their responsibility by shifting the burden back onto the PVOT. This participant preferred not to consider the possibility that a PVOT may be a victim of threats or coercion rather than merely deception. Yet if the person in question is subject to threats towards themselves or, as has been reported (Surtees, 2007), towards their families back home, compelling information is unlikely, of itself, to ensure or even increase the extent to which any decision to refuse help is genuinely 'theirs'. Other BFOs reported wishing they had greater powers to override a PVOT's refusal of help and to require them to register as at-risk, as the law permits BFOs to do with children [P8].

BFOs also reported discharging their moral responsibilities by returning suspected PVOTs to their country of origin. Thus recasting what is essentially an immigration control measure as a paternalistic, humanitarian act:

*Even if they don't co-operate, you can have the safeguard measure of refusing them... So you have that additional kind of, I can do something for this person, even if they won't co-operate, if the immigration legislation supports it. [P8]*

When asked how a forced return equated to a safeguarding act, two BFOs reported that UKBF liaised with agencies in the return country, including embassies and airline liaison officers, in order to inform them about the impending arrival of a vulnerable individual and allow them to initiate (unspecified) protective measures. Yet it is unclear how much these efforts result in a material reduction in the risk to suspected victims. UKBF does not follow up these cases once the responsible BFO has passed the intelligence on to the relevant agency [P7] so it is difficult to assess the impact of this measure. BFOs seemed to show unquestioning belief in the potential of forced return to protect individuals, which both appears unjustified, and contrasts with the 'fear' [P4] and 'anguish' [P7] some described at

the thought of mistakenly allowing a victim to *enter* the country. The lack of UKBF protocols for following up cases of returned victims allows this blind faith to persist, by ensuring that BFOs will not be faced with the human consequences of forced returns. This relative lack of accountability for forced returns may be encouraging their use as a means of protection, even in the face of little or no evidence of their effectiveness.

While equating the forcible return of suspected PVOTs with the discharging of a moral responsibility to protect them seems a self-serving aspect of SAT culture, it may also make SAT culture complicit in a prioritisation of border control aims over the protection of the vulnerable. Even if they do help in some instances, it is far from clear that forced returns are an effective safeguarding tool; what *is* certain is that they are powerful tools for influencing the location of future trafficking crimes, because the return of suspected victims can displace, at least in the short term, the risk of trafficking crime from the UK. Thus while removals are ostensibly used to promote humanitarian protection, their only clear benefit is to the security and economy of the UK, in the form of reducing crime and the burden on the state of supporting vulnerable PVOTS.

Despite what is emerging as a modest ability to help victims of trafficking the desire amongst BFOs to feel that they have discharged their moral responsibilities to suspected victims, was widely shared. As one officer explained it:

*We've got a lot of officers who really, really care about it, they have to feel that they're doing something.* [P8]

This was seemingly encouraged by UKBF. Asked whether the training heightened the sense of responsibility, one BFO said:

*Yeah. Absolutely, yeah. Especially as we've had quite a strong emphasis on making sure we don't miss them. And a lot of pressure, especially during the training, there was a lot of pressure. So, you know, you are the last person that person may see that could help them because once they pass you, they may be gone forever. So there is a certain amount of responsibility that we have to burden.* [P7]

This also reflects the great emphasis placed by EU and UK policymakers on the border as a site of unique potential for the identification and protection of victims of trafficking (International Organisation for Migration 2005; Frontex 2012: 7; Eurojust 2012; Centre for Social Justice 2013; European Migration Network 2014). Yet it is hard to grasp the tangible

difference this emphasis on the border, and the corresponding priority given to the SAT agenda, is making to the plight of victims. There is no UKBF follow-up with suspected victims who do not consent to enter the NRM process. Nor, it was confirmed to us in meetings with relevant Home Office officials, is there any on-going research with identified victims to find out *why* they did not consent to referral at the border and what, if anything, might have encouraged them to accept or even seek help offered by BFOs. This makes it difficult, both for BFOs working on the ground, and for scholars, to know whether there is more that could be done at the border to help victims, and therefore whether BFOs' sense of responsibility is proportionate to their actual power to help.<sup>11</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Our findings have shown that SAT officers at Heathrow are deeply committed morally to the work they do, that they describe prioritising the protection of vulnerable people over immigration concerns both in principle and in practice, so far as their relatively constrained powers permit. This commitment is somewhat facilitated by organisational changes, including training, use of resources, and a conscious elevation of the professional status of humanitarian work.

Our study also sheds light on the approach adopted by Heathrow Border Force to resolve the potential conflict between the need to fulfil humanitarian duties and implement effective immigration control. This approach involves efforts to professionalise SAT work by making it voluntary and skilled. It also involves efforts to separate out the humanitarian and immigration functions of BFO work, by creating purely SAT shifts, in the form of floor-walking and by giving floor-walking SAT officers the operational authority (though perhaps not routinely the opportunity) to intervene in and stop immigration processes initiated by other BFOs. However, a question for further consideration is how far this operational approach is being undermined by the apparent political drive to render more like a police force the border-control arm of the state.

Our participants were without exception positive in their assessment of their

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<sup>11</sup> The excellent empirical work by Fafo and the Nexus Institute (Brunovskis and Surtees 2012) in relation to this issue highlights the dire need for an approach to anti-trafficking research that takes as its focus the entire story of a victim of trafficking, with all the missed, declined, and botched opportunities to gain help taken into account against the background of the psychological and material situation of the victim at the time.

organisation's approach to developing and pursuing the SAT strategy. On the face of it, this confidence is at odds with the statistical picture of the success of that strategy. For example, in the first quarter of 2015, only 2% of referrals by state agencies to the UK's National Referral Mechanism emanated from the UKBF.<sup>12</sup> This contrasts with the great emphasis placed by policy makers on the border as a site of opportunity to intervene and protect victims of trafficking. It prompts the following question: where do BFOs perceive the key challenges to effective SAT work as lying, if not within the institution of the Border Force? We have not been able to examine that question here. Yet it is worth noting that all but one of the BFOs we spoke to identified those challenges as lying in current limits to their legal powers to intervene with victims to protect them. In particular, their responses revealed that the lack of new BFO powers to match their new humanitarian duties forces them to use their immigration powers opportunistically for humanitarian aims (Authors, forthcoming). This suggests a further dimension of anti-trafficking work in which the pursuit of immigration controls may both facilitate and constrain the newly-acquired humanitarian purposes of those charged with enforcing our borders.

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<sup>12</sup> See quarterly statistics from the UK National Crime Agency's National Referral Mechanism for Victims of Human Trafficking (e.g. NCA 2015).

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Table 1 Interview Participants

| <b>Position</b>                       | <b>Number interviewed</b> | <b>Responsibility</b>   |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Assistant Immigration Officer         | 1                         | Processing asylum claims and assisting on cases of ‘doubtful visitors’. Not SAT trained.  |
| Immigration Officer with SAT training | 5                         | Assessing passenger documentation, such as passports and visas. Make referrals for ‘doubtful visitors’. Deal with referrals from other immigration officers in relation to safeguarding and trafficking concerns. |
| Immigration Officer (intelligence)    | 1                         | Coordinating and responding to safeguarding and trafficking intel.  |
| Immigration Officer (higher)          | 2                         | Manage staff and deal with passenger referrals made by immigration officers.  |
| Immigration Officer (senior)          | 1                         | SAT strategic lead. Manages team of higher and SAT trained officers.  |