Banks join police hunt to stop people traffickers

Forces are teaching branch staff how to identify victims and criminals, and what to do next

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Barclays is working with three police forces to teach its staff how to spot victims and perpetrators of slavery.

Police have enlisted the help of bank staff to combat modern slavery, Money can reveal.

Barclays is working with three police forces to teach managers and cashiers how to spot victims and perpetrators.

The news comes after it was revealed that police are struggling to tackle the growing problem of people trafficking. Last week, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services said investigations had been unsuccessful because police forces found them too complex, and some officers felt there was a lack of public sympathy for the victims.

With the help of the charity Stop the Traffik, Barclays identified a number of locations considered high risk, including Peterborough. Last month Cambridgeshire police met managers from 13 branches in the city and surrounding area.

They talked through the signals to watch for. These include unusual withdrawal and spending patterns, such as making multiple foreign trips. The bank could then freeze suspicious accounts and report them to the police.

Sarah Brown of Stop the Traffik said: “Criminals traffic people to make money, therefore you cannot ignore the financial sector in addressing the problem.”
“We have previously worked with frontline services including the NHS and the police — the obvious next step was to start talking to financial institutions.”

We need to have the confidence to step up and say, ‘I don’t think this is right’

With the help of police and the charity, Barclays has developed a data-profiling system to analyse account activity, as well as the way people behave in branches or while withdrawing money from a cash dispenser.

Barclays said: “This is an important issue for us, because we know that those who are forcing people into modern slavery use bank accounts to launder the proceeds of this crime or facilitate it, such as using accounts to buy travel to the UK for their victims.”

Other potential alarm signals include someone withdrawing their wages soon after they are paid, or a bank account registered to a property with multiple residents.

Branch workers will also watch to see if customers opening an account or withdrawing money are accompanied by someone who appears to be in control of them and their documents. The additional person may appear to be acting simply as their interpreter.

In many cases, the documents used to open the accounts and the wages paid into them are genuine — but the traffickers might control their victims’ bank cards and not allow them access to their money.

Barclays is also working with the West Yorkshire and Avon and Somerset police forces on tackling modern slavery.

Stop the Traffik said it hoped other banks would follow Barclays’ lead. It has already worked with HSBC to raise awareness of slavery and how bank accounts are used by the criminals involved.

Detective Superintendent Mat Newman of Cambridgeshire police said: “We need to have better awareness of slavery, and for society to have the confidence to step up and say, ‘I don’t think this is right’.

“We always want best value, and to get things cheaper — we do not tend to wonder if someone is being exploited.”

Usually, police have to go to court to obtain a production order if they want to access someone’s financial data. The anti-slavery training allows Barclays’ staff to lend a helping hand.

Paul Horlick, the director of Barclays’ financial intelligence unit, said part of the process involved “empowering” staff to act when they have suspicions. This includes allowing them to freeze or close accounts and report customers to the police.

The initiative is part of a wider trend of using financial institutions to police customers’ activity.

From January, banks and building societies will be required to help identify illegal immigrants and foreign offenders by checking the names of account-holders against a database run by the anti-fraud organisation Cifas.
Such clampdowns could, however, lead to innocent customers having their accounts frozen or new customers being turned away, without explanation.

Earlier this year, the consumer group Which? said some anti-fraud measures implemented by banks had left customers feeling like criminals.

A Money article on April 9 revealed that TSB had accepted it was “overzealous” and “heavy-handed” in the way it applied fraud rules to a current account that had been wrongly frozen for days (“Since TSB put my account on ice I’ve gone cold on security”).

Banks and building societies are also refusing to do business with allegedly politically exposed persons (PEPs) as part of their interpretation of international money-laundering rules. Last year HSBC threatened to close the current account of Alan Charlton, a former ambassador to Brazil, unless he responded to what he saw as “invasive” questioning.

The PEP label can be applied to politicians, high-ranking public, judicial or military officials, senior executives of state-owned businesses and ambassadors, as well as their relations and even in-laws.