

LONDON – Rev. Benjamin Lysykanych sat on an overstuffed sofa in his office at London’s main Ukrainian Catholic Church on a Saturday afternoon, postponing a Christening to finish an interview.

“They are closed,” Rev. Lysykanych said, characterizing many of the Ukrainian migrants who attend mass every Sunday at the church, located just off Oxford Street in central London. “For instance, people will call the church, but they will never give their surnames. They won’t give any information about themselves.”

Britain has long been a magnet for migrants from Ukraine, even before the breakup of the Soviet Union and the expansion of the European Union. During World War II, for instance, England became home to many Ukrainians fleeing Stalin and his dictatorial regime. Those political refugees established churches, set up community centers and, in large part, successfully integrated into British life.

Today’s migrants, however, are economic refugees who often prefer to remain on the periphery of British society. Lured by an abundance of blue-collar jobs in the hotel, restaurant and construction industries, nearly 40,000 Ukrainians now call London and its metropolitan area home. Countless others have settled in other parts of Great Britain, including Scotland and Ireland.

The majority of these migrants, however, are in Britain illegally. That, coupled with their secretive nature, has presented health organizations that work to lower the rates of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in Britain with new challenges, according to individuals from non-profit groups who work with migrants here.

Because so many fear arrest and deportation, migrants who are considered at higher risk of acquiring HIV/AIDS and STDs, such as sex workers and homosexual men, have gone deeper underground in Britain, making them more difficult to find. Many are shying away from programs that could give them important information about protecting their health.

“It’s a challenge,” said Mary Cate Maclennan, an outreach worker with Clash, an organization that provides condoms, educational materials and medical services to sex workers in London’s central Soho district.

When Poland joined the EU in 2005, for instance, many Ukrainian sex workers the group was counseling disappeared from their usual hangouts because the police presence was more visible. The women feared being arrested because with the expansion of the EU, police had become more vigilant in cracking down on illegal migrants.

“Within two months, all the illegal Eastern European women were off the streets,” said Maclennan. “That means the women are moving into the periphery of London, outside our reach.”

Britain has traditionally had a strong health system and programs geared toward those considered at higher risk of acquiring HIV/AIDS and other STDs, said Lisa Power of Terrence Higgins Trust, Britain’s largest and most prestigious non-profit health organization.

When the virus first appeared in Britain 25 years ago, Power said the government had a constant dialogue with groups that were considered most at-risk of acquiring HIV/AIDS at that time -- homosexual men, injecting drug users, and sex workers. Consequently, the government supported outreach programs targeted toward those most at-risk of acquiring the virus, even though the country was being lead by the socially conservative prime minister, Margaret Thatcher.

As a result, Britain has largely contained the growth of the virus among the general public, according to UNAIDS, the arm of the United Nations that coordinates efforts on the global pandemic. Today, throughout the U.K., outreach workers provide condoms and educational anti-AIDS materials to sex workers, in gay bars, and others considered being at a higher risk of acquiring the virus.

Indeed, the real concern in Britain today is about migrants entering the country from nations with high HIV/AIDS rates, according to non-profit groups.

“Eastern European migrants are somebody we have to be concerned about...because of their sexual health,” said Power. “They have epidemics at home...that haven’t yet translated here.”

It is uncertain, for instance, how many Ukrainian women are involved in the sex business in London or in Britain. But that number may be higher than many people think, Ukrainian migrants said.

Partly that is because some women work in the sex business for a short period of time in order to raise enough money to pay for fake passports or visas that would allow them to stay in Britain. Since the expansion of the EU, a vibrant market in forged passports from Poland or the Baltic countries has emerged. The cost of those documents can run up to 6,000 pounds, or \$11,400.

Rev. Lysykanych explained the vicious cycle some women fall into after arriving in the U.K.:

“They come to Britain with good intentions, but they are dealt a bad deck of cards with visas on the black market,” he said. “They are raising money for their families back in Ukraine. The longer they stay, the more money they can make. But they fall into debt and get abused.”

To pay off their debts, the women will sell sex for money. Few people know what the women do for a living, although the emotional toll they pay is high.

“One feels sorry for them,” said Rev. Lysykanych. “They are damaged.”

Ukrainian migrant men, however, said it is not unusual for their female compatriots to ask for money before getting into a sexual relationship.

“They will ask for money,” said Ivan a 40-something construction worker in London from Western Ukraine who refused to use his real name. “They don’t want to give anything for free once they are here.”

Ivan said he has never paid for sex and doesn’t know if other men have.

Because the community is so closed, it has been difficult for British-Ukrainian organizations to institute programs that would help new migrants with health and other issues, said Rev. Lysykavych.

It is critical, however, that migrants get the health information they need, including men who have sex with men, said Julian Hows, the European coordinator for the Global Network of People with HIV.

With its vibrant gay scene, London is a magnet for men from around the world, including Ukraine, said Hows. Gay men who feel they are not accepted in their native countries because of their sexuality will often move to London in the hope of living a more ‘open’ lifestyle. Many are young and come from countries with high HIV/AIDS rates.

Often, however, these gay migrant men fall outside the reach of British outreach workers because they don't know English or can't afford to frequent London's central bars, which are inundated with often-graphic anti-AIDS materials.

"The largest single number of new infections in the U.K. (in 2005) were young gay men ages 18-30," said Hows, who worked in Ukraine for a short period to help with outreach efforts there. "One of the reasons is that mainstream interventions are not targeting at-risk groups."

Recognizing that more outreach needs to be done with migrant men, including those from Eastern Europe, Clash and other organizations have started efforts through the internet. Posting advertisements in several different languages, including Russian, the organizations hope gay men will turn to them to get information and help.

Because these projects are in a start-up phase it is too early to gauge their success, outreach workers said. Still, they hope sooner rather than later the anti-AIDS message will get out, not only in Britain but also in the countries from where the men originated.

British anti-AIDS activists working with migrant communities said a major challenge they face now is from the public. Following a tendency evident in other European countries worried about increased illegal migration, the British people have started to show a strong anti-migration sentiment.

Although businesses need the cheap labor that illegal migrants provide, British nationals have started to complain that migrants are straining their social welfare system. Even though the National Health Service (NHS) remains popular with the British, an increasing number of Britons are calling for an overhaul of the country's medical system, which provides free care to those who need it, including illegal migrants. Britain's media, for instance, in the last year has had a lively debate over the pros and cons of reforming Britain's NHS. Numerous opinion polls in recent years, meanwhile, suggest the British are ready to pay more for better health care.

Activists admitted that some of the negative reaction is targeted towards migrants coming from African countries with high rates of HIV/AIDS. The conservative press in Britain, for instance, has accused some Africans who are HIV-positive of coming to the U.K. in order to get free medical care, calling them 'HIV-tourists'.

Anti-AIDS activists and social workers said such stories fuel negative attitudes toward migrants as such.

"HIV stigma has been used to frighten people about immigration," said Power of Terrence Higgins Trust. "The question of HIV and migration has made the immigration debate worse in this country."