

Briefing: Modern Slavery & Human Trafficking in the United Kingdom

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Overview / Definition:

- Globally, there are more people trapped in slavery today than at any point in human history.
- It's important to understand the distinctions between Modern Slavery, Human Trafficking and People Smuggling:
 - Modern slavery is;
 - The condition of being forced by threats, violence or coercion to work for little or no pay, and of having no power to control what work you do or where you do it.
 - Modern slavery includes sexual exploitation, labour exploitation, domestic servitude, criminal exploitation and organ harvesting. Many definitions also include forced marriage.
 - Human trafficking is;
 - The recruitment, movement, receipt or harbouring of people (both domestically and internationally) by means such as threat, force, fraud, coercion, abduction or deception (or abuse of a position of power / vulnerability), with the intention of exploiting them. Human trafficking is a form of modern slavery.
 - People smuggling is;
 - The procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a state party of which the person is not a national.
- Modern slavery and human trafficking are violations of an individual's human rights. Human rights are a universally agreed moral framework which establishes a minimum standard of life which no one should be allowed to fall below. Victims of modern slavery are often deprived of a number of their basic human rights, including (but not limited to) their;
 - Right to equality
 - Freedom from discrimination or interference
 - Right to life, liberty, freedom of movement and security of person
 - Freedom from slavery, torture or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment
 - Right to freedom of speech, or to own property
 - Right to education, to desirable employment or adequate living standards
 - Right to participate in culture of your community
- Put more simply: Slavery is the control of one person(s) by another.

When one person possesses or controls another person to deprive that person of their individual freedom. Allowing the exploiter to benefit from the outputs and products of that person's continued existence. This control is maintained and applied through violence and its threat, with the aim of this control primarily being economic betterment, but it may also include sexual or physiological benefits for the exploiter.

Scale & Statistics – UK

- A study based on sampling suggested the number of victims in the UK could be up to 122,000 ([Global Slavery Index, 2023](#)). Another study, which took annual data from one police force and extrapolated it for the whole UK, estimated 99,469 potential victims – but said this was a “significant underestimate” because of all the cases not known or reported to police ([CSJ/Justice & Care, 2020](#)). The hidden nature of modern slavery makes producing an accurate prevalence measure difficult.
- With the rise in estimated victim numbers plus inflation, a [2025 paper estimated the true socio-economic impact of modern slavery at £52 billion to £60 billion](#) a year for the UK (Unseen, 2025). This report built on a [2018 UK Government study](#) that put the economic and social cost of modern slavery at between £3.3 billion and £4.3 billion (based on a low and outdated estimate of only 10,000 to 13,000 suspected victims in the country, far lower than modern estimates).
- [23,411 potential victims of modern slavery](#) were referred through the UK National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in 2025. The NRM is the UK framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive appropriate support. The NRM is also the mechanism through which the Government collects potential victim data. 2025’s NRM figure continued a recent trend of rising annual figures. Important: The number of NRM referrals provides an indication of the scale of **known victims** in the UK but is **not a good estimate of overall prevalence of modern slavery**. Further analysis shows:
 - The most common nationalities referred in 2025 were UK (22% of all potential victims), Eritrean (13%), and Vietnamese (8.5%).
 - 74% (17,350) of referred potential victims were male and 26% (6,042) were female
 - Of the 21,721 cases where age at exploitation is known, 57% (12,458) were adults at the point of exploitation, and 43% (9,263) were children.
- [7,130](#) potential victims went through the separate Duty to Notify (DtN) process in 2025 – the highest amount ever in a single year (up 27% versus 2024). The DtN process is for potential victims who are identified by officials, but who choose not to enter the NRM and want to stay anonymous instead. This can be for many reasons, but is often linked to a distrust of authorities or a fear of deportation if they go through the formal process.
- The Salvation Army in England and Wales has for 14 years been contracted by the UK Government to provide specialist support for adults referred through the NRM. Taking into account those already in the service at the start of the year, a total of [4,726 people received support](#) in 2024-25.
- In 2023, there were [2,089 calls and reports](#) into the Modern Slavery Helpline (operated by Unseen) that were flagged as relating to modern slavery, involving 4,839 potential victims.
- In the year to Feb 2025, police forces were dealing with an average of [2,608 modern slavery investigations each month](#) (Modern Slavery and Organised Immigration Crime Unit annual report, 2025).
- In the year to September 2025, Ministry of Justice statistics show [56 convictions for modern slavery offences](#) in England and Wales, from 122 cases that proceeded to prosecution (MoJ, Outcomes by Offence data tool: Sept 2025).
- The National Crime Agency recorded only [1 ‘high-impact disruption’ affecting an organised crime gang involved in modern slavery in 2024-25](#), out of 450 total high-impact disruptions. 55 of the 450 involved child sexual abuse & exploitation, and 56 involved organised immigration crime (and 149 involved the biggest single category, drugs).

Scale & Statistics – Global

- Modern slavery and human trafficking are estimated to make \$236 billion in illegal profits for criminals each year ([ILO, 2024](#)). It is thought to be the world's joint third-largest criminal enterprise, after counterfeiting and drug trafficking and on a similar scale to illegal logging. ([Global Financial Integrity report, 2017](#)).
- It is a hidden crime, but the best estimates suggest there are 49.6 million people in modern slavery (Source: [International Labour Organization / Walk Free / IOM, Sept 2022](#)), of which:
 - 19.9 million people in forced labour in private or state-run companies, or criminal exploitation
 - 1.4 million experiencing domestic servitude in private homes
 - 6.3 million in forced sexual exploitation (including 1.7 million children)
 - 22 million people in a forced marriage to which they had not consented
- Women and girls are disproportionately affected by Modern Slavery, accounting for 54% of all victims (ILO, Walk Free Foundation, and IOM, 2022) and 78% of victims of forced commercial sexual exploitation.

Types of Modern Slavery:

- **Sexual exploitation** is a form of sexual abuse. A person can be a victim of sexual exploitation if a sexual act(s) takes place and;
 - it is in exchange for basic necessities, such as food, shelter or protection
 - it is in exchange for something they need or want
 - they are made to feel frightened of the consequences if they do not (coercion)
 - the person who is exploiting them stands to gain financially or socially
- When we talk about “sexual exploitation” in a modern slavery context, we frequently and subconsciously are referring to *Commercial Sexual Exploitation* – rather than exploitation for the purposes of sexual gratification. Within the UK, commercial sexual exploitation often – although not exclusively includes;
 - Abuse through prostitution, escort services and massage services
 - Abuse through pornography, stripping, web-cam and phone sex services. This can occur in a number of settings including on street, in licensed massage parlours or in “pop-up” brothels – which are predominantly low cost rented residential accommodation, being illegally sub-let as unlicensed houses of multiple occupancy. Victims are also advertised online through adult-service websites
- **Labour exploitation** is the abuse of people in a workplace for profit. The impact is often devastating.
 - Legitimate – and sometimes large scale – businesses and employers can often be “infiltrated” by exploiters, who introduce victims of labour exploitation into their labour supply chains, either directly or through labour providers or recruitment agencies. Acting as “unlicensed gangmasters”. Industries that have been assessed as being of significant risk of this (owing to their scale, the nature of the work itself and the high attrition / low retention rates of staff) include:
 - Agriculture / Farming
 - Warehouses / Logistics
 - Food Production / Fishing / Maritime
 - Construction / Contracting
 - Cleaning / Facilities Management
 - Care Industry
 - Waste Management / Recycling
 - However, there are also instances of labour exploitation whereby employers and labour users are not merely aware of but are also actively complicit in the exploitation. Examples of these exploitative employment practices include:
 - Car Washes and Nail Bars

- Restaurants / Take Aways
 - Textile / Garment Industry
- **Domestic servitude** is arguably the most clandestine form of modern slavery, making it extremely difficult to detect. This is because the work is performed in private residences under the guise of seemingly normal practice, which is used as cover for the exploitation and control of someone. Examples of this can include;
 - Those seeking work as Nannies, Au Pairs, Domiciliary Care-givers or other domestic help
 - Victims of labour exploitation – also used in domestic settings, when not at their workplace
 - Spouses – who believe that they are entering into an arranged or facilitated marriage, but are being trafficked for the purpose of domestic servitude, through abuse of spousal VISA processes
 - Other family members
 - The moment their employment arrangement transitions into a situation whereby they cannot leave on their own free will, it becomes a case of enslavement. The victim is usually expected to work around a person's home every day and be 'on call' 24 hours a day.
 - Individuals with learning disabilities (both diagnosed and undiagnosed) are disproportionately affected by this form of exploitation, as well as forced marriage and other forms of domestic or "honour" abuse.
 - **Criminal Exploitation** involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where individuals are forced (through, threat, violence, coercion or manipulation) to perform tasks on behalf of another individual or group of individuals; which is often of a criminal nature examples include;
 - Forced begging
 - Shoplifting
 - Pickpocketing
 - Cannabis cultivation
 - Drug dealing
 - Financial exploitation
 - The most commonly recognised form of criminal exploitation in the UK is "County Lines". This is a form of criminal exploitation in which criminals threaten, groom or manipulate people (of all ages – but in cases as young as 7 years old) into storing, moving or dealing drugs. The term 'County Lines' refer to the fact that victims are sent out of their home towns or cities, to deal drugs in new territories (often rural), while the "line" represents the mobile phones that are used to control a young person who is delivering the drugs.
 - **Material Exploitation** is a form of criminal exploitation in which exploiters take over the property (Phone, home address, vehicle etc) of a person - who may be vulnerable to such exploitation, in order to use it as a base for a number of areas of criminality. Cases of the use of a person's home for these purposes is often referred to as 'cuckooing'. In many cases – cuckooing and county lines forms of exploitation are perpetrated by the same criminal(s) and criminal networks, and potential victims may – in some (but not all) cases – be dealing with issues of substance misuse, mental health problems, be elderly or disabled or be in debt to or fear of the gang.

Vulnerability:

- Understanding the fluid nature of vulnerability is crucial, as exploitation can happen to anybody. Victims of exploitation are growing more diverse. People who may have been viewed as lower risk can just as easily be groomed and exploited. A person may be vulnerable if, as a result of their current or previous situation or circumstances, they are unable to protect themselves or others from harm or exploitation. It's important to remember that the nature and extent of someone's vulnerability can change over time, in response to social, environmental and personal factors.
- Where there is a distinct likelihood of encountering major difficulties within the family atmosphere, or the threat to the family itself (because of such deficient capital resources as money, education, access to health care, or important/vital information) also places individuals at heightened risk of potential exploitation – this is referred to as Structural Vulnerability.
- That said – there are (in many cases) some critical moments or circumstances that can increase a person's vulnerability and risk of being targeted by exploiters, which include (albeit not exclusively);
 - Exclusion or absence from education
 - Being in care or a care leaver
 - Having peer influences with connections to gangs or criminality / Peer Pressure
 - Presenting at a hospital or GP practice with injuries indicative of violence (also a potential indicator)
 - Entering the criminal justice system
 - Communication difficulties (By speech, language, sensory impairments or language barrier)
 - A learning disability (diagnosed or undiagnosed)
 - Neurodiversity
 - Experiencing difficulties with mental health
 - Experiencing difficulties with physical health (lifelong condition, temporary or disability)
 - Experiencing substance dependency or abuse
 - Experiencing financial difficulties
 - Past or ongoing experience(s) of trauma, which can include;
 - Domestic abuse – either as the subject of abuse or as a witness
 - Neglect, abuse or violence as a child
 - Unsafe or unstable living or home environment
 - Going through periods of transition or change
 - Feelings of social isolation
 - Being a missing person (also a potential indicator of exploitation)
 - Homelessness, rough sleeping and destitution or living in unsecure housing
 - Lack of supportive familial or social relationships (For example - members of the LGBTQ+ community may receive threats to “out” them if the exploiters feels that this may result in psychological or even physical harm to the victim – such threats harm an individual's self-image and identity)
- Although imperative to comprehend that exploitation can happen to anyone; it is thought that these experiences may increase, create or intensify vulnerability owing to the fact that they are likely to;
 - Increase the level of risk people are exposed to in their daily lives
 - Influence the thought processes and behaviours developed to cope with difficult experiences
 - lead people to view exploitation as a normal, expected or unavoidable part of life

Trafficking Tactics:

- Human traffickers use various forms of manipulation, force, fraud, and coercion to control and exploit victims. When we consider tactics – we are referring to both methods of acquiring or recruiting victims as well as methods of maintaining control over them. These tactics often vary depending upon the type of exploitation, but in many cases involve;
 - Debt Bondage – (Creation & Enforcement of debt / Pseudo-debt - either financial or in kind)
 - Offering access to employment opportunities, including;
 - Offers of non-existent work opportunities
 - Charging for access to work opportunities that should be free
 - Offering work that exists and is legitimate – but seizing any wages earned
 - Offering work that is exaggerated or different to the work the victims receive
 - Offering false promises of love (often referred to as the “boyfriend Model” – this model of exploitation named to reflect the disproportionately high volume of male exploiters)
 - Promises of marriage (common in cases of domestic servitude and sexual exploitation)
 - Promises of a better life
 - Psychological coercion
 - Dehumanisation – injuring self-worth
 - Isolation from friends, family, loved ones and peers
 - Emotional manipulation
 - Fabricating Pseudo-familial ties (lies about a victim’s relationship to the exploiter)
 - Stockholm Syndrome (emotional attachment to exploiters)
 - Reinforcement of fears – use of “Worst Case Scenarios”
 - Creating distrust in others (including government bodies)
 - Threat of arrest
 - Threat of deportation
 - Use of “Shame” / “Honour” as a means of manipulation
 - Blackmail
 - Threat of violence towards victim(s)
 - Threat of violence towards victims’ families or loved ones
 - Use of physical control methods (often a last resort as it is unsustainable for long periods of time, and has potential to result in injuries which may attract unwanted attention);
 - Abduction
 - Physical Violence
 - Sexual Violence
 - Economic abuse
 - Control of travel documents / ID documents

Root Causes / Supply & Demand:

- **Supply** – at any one time - there exists a cohort or “pool” of individuals, who – sometimes by virtue of the above-mentioned potential indicators of an individual’s vulnerability – may be deemed vulnerable to exploitation. However, there also exist mechanisms and social structures that also perpetuate the root causes of modern slavery and replenish the supply or potential victims of exploitation;
 - Poverty – Money is a fundamental requirement for the necessities of life and survival. Through unemployment / redundancy or through legally-created deprivation of material and social resources, those who lack money, and viable alternative options to earn it, are at significant risk of exploitation
 - Identity / Discrimination - the denial to some people of the rights and status of full personhood, on the basis of race, gender, caste and other factors shapes how people are treated in the labour market, and perpetuates inequity of opportunity – that in turn creates vulnerability to exploitation
 - Limited or no labour protections - create pools of unprotected workers outside the remit of state safeguards, who lack the protection of the power of collective bargaining and face serious barriers to acting collectively and exerting their rights
 - Regimes of restricted mobility – migrant vulnerability to forced labour begins at the border. It is often claimed that tighter borders reduce exploitation. In reality, the limiting or closing of safe and legitimate options for economic migration pushes people into more exploitative, criminal and clandestine options.
 - Lack of education / rights awareness – in nations where demand is high for an overseas workforce, more needs to be done at source – in nations where age, gender and social class can impact a person’s resilience to exploitation - in order to ensure those willing to travel for economic betterment are aware of what to expect and what their rights and entitlements are.

- **Demand** – whether individual and opportunistic demand for cheap labour or the purchase of sexual services, or systemic corporate and governmental elements that create pressure within individual markets for highly exploitable forms of labour or open up spaces within which that labour can be exploited. These dynamics are integral to the nature of human supply chains as they are currently constituted, and can create environments where high demand drives supply and exploitation can flourish;
 - Concentrated Corporate Power & Ownerships – Corporations who operate on global scale, no longer own their production processes, and in many cases can have thousands of individual suppliers. This creates huge downward pressure on working conditions, allows large corporations to dictate value and process within a market and lowers the share of value available to suppliers and their workers as wages.
 - Outsourcing – this fragments responsibility for labour standards and makes oversight and accountability very difficult; especially when labour supply is outsourced to low scale suppliers who may rely on using unfair labour practices to generate profit.
 - Poor purchasing practices – Consumer demand for low-cost goods, delivered quickly and cheaply, has led to a business model of downward pressure, place a heavy cost and time pressure on suppliers and creating a “race to the bottom”, in trying to provide the lowest bid - which can lead to risky practices like unauthorised subcontracting or non-payment of wages.
 - Gaps in Governance – a lack of or weak governance opens up spaces for bad practice. Limited resource and capacity means that the laws designed to protect workers are inconsistently enforced. This - coupled with exploiters increasing resilience to adapt and develop new methods to circumvent mechanisms for detection, can ensure an environment where exploitation continues unidentified and unchallenged.
 - Historic lack of accountability – those who demand sexual services have historically had little concern for the legality of their actions. In England and Wales, the sale and purchase of sexual services between consenting adults is legal. However, various activities related to prostitution, such as soliciting, kerb crawling, brothel-keeping and various forms of exploitation, are illegal. The only existing criminal offence of paying for sex is based on exploitation, which makes it an offence for a person to pay for the sexual services of a prostitute who has been subjected to force, coercion or deception.

Slavery in Supply Chains

- The key players in most situations of modern slavery can be thought of as the perpetrator, the victim and the consumer. For forced labour in business supply chains, 'consumer' can mean both the business that is benefiting from that exploitation somewhere in its supply chain (through lower costs or higher margins), or a person buying products or services from that business.
- Section 54 of the UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 requires organisations with an annual turnover over £36m to prepare and publish a Slavery and Human Trafficking Statement each year. This statement must set out the steps the organisation has taken to ensure modern slavery is not taking place in their business or supply chains.
- There is now a [public register of these statements](#), and it is strongly encouraged – though not mandatory – for businesses to add their own annual modern slavery statements to the register.
- This legislation aims to increase transparency within supply chains, allowing the public, consumers, employees and investors to know what steps an organisation is taking to tackle modern slavery and human trafficking, and to encourage public scrutiny of organisation's policies and procedures in this area. A [survey of business leaders](#) showed that 77% of them expect to find modern slavery in their operations or supply chains