

Modern slavery is present in every part of the UK and exists in many forms, including trafficking into criminal activities like cannabis farming, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude or forced labour on farms, in construction, hospitality, shops, nail bars, car washes or manufacturing.

The UK is not only affected by modern slavery within its borders: as one of the world's largest economies, the UK is also exposed to the risk of modern slavery through the products it imports.



Nearly **two-thirds of all forced labour cases in the UK** are **linked to global supply chains**, with workers exploited across a wide range of sectors and at every stage of the supply chain.¹

The UK's National Referral Mechanism

*Potential victims of modern slavery in the UK who come to the attention of authorised first responder organisations are referred to the National Referral Mechanism, or NRM. Authorised first responder organisations include local authorities, specified non-governmental organisations (NGOs), police forces and specified government agencies. Adults (aged 18 or above) must consent to being referred to the NRM, whilst children under the age of 18 need not consent to being referred. Adults who were exploited as children can also be referred.*²

Key Statistics

- The 2023 Global Slavery Index estimates that on any given day in 2021, there were **122,000 people living in modern slavery in the UK.**³
- In 2022, **16,938 people were referred to the National Referral Mechanism** as a potential victim of modern slavery.⁴
- Of all referrals in 2022, **52%** were for potential victims who claimed exploitation as **adults**, whilst **41%** claimed exploitation as **children.**⁵
- Of all referrals in 2022, **78%** of potential victims were **male** and **21%** were **female.**⁶
- In 2022, for the first time, Albanian nationals overtook UK nationals as the most commonly referred nationality, with Eritrean nationals being third.⁷
- For adult potential victims, labour exploitation was most commonly reported, whereas child potential victims were most often referred for criminal exploitation.⁸

Case Study

Wayne came from a family of addiction, facing a tough childhood with drugs and violence. At a very young age, Wayne had to take care of himself and his brother due to the difficult circumstances. When he was 16, Wayne left school. He was by now an alcoholic, and on his last day school, Wayne tried cannabis. He quickly became addicted to the substance and its effects, allowing him to escape from all the pain, anger, guilt and shame he was suffering with.



A criminal gang targeted him because of his vulnerability and addiction. Initially, they posed as friends, but they started exploiting him by making him sell drugs to pay off a debt for drugs he had already consumed. The gang used threats and intimidation to keep Wayne trapped in a cycle of exploitation. Wayne was unable to escape the vicious cycle, and the debt kept increasing, leading to a form of exploitation called debt bondage.

For a long time, Wayne didn't seek out help as he blamed himself for the situation and believed he had to repay the debt. He didn't think going to the police was an option; Wayne and other members of his community had often faced discrimination and mistreatment by the police so didn't trust them.

Eventually, Wayne managed to break free from the exploitation by moving away and staying hidden. He shares his story to shed light on the hidden reality of exploitation and the complexities faced by victims who often feel trapped and ashamed, making it difficult to seek help.

Source: [Unseen](#)

The UK Government's Response to Modern Slavery

The UK government has overall had a strong response to modern slavery, particularly when compared to other regional and global actors.

In the UK, modern slavery is criminalised in line with international conventions under the 2015 Modern Slavery Act, and the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014.

Despite some progress, the UK's efforts to combat modern slavery still have notable shortcomings. These gaps mainly revolve around the necessity to improve support for survivors and tackle the potential negative impacts of recent and proposed changes to the country's immigration policy, which have heightened the risk of modern slavery.

In particular, the UK's shift towards a more hostile and discriminatory environment towards migration has made it increasingly difficult for vulnerable people including modern slavery victim-survivors to access essential support and services.

For a full assessment of the UK's response to modern slavery, [read the latest Global Slavery Index report](#).

Root Causes of Trafficking in the UK

The root causes of modern slavery in the UK are complex and multifaceted.

Vulnerability of Individuals: Vulnerable individuals, such as migrants, asylum seekers, and those facing economic hardships or social isolation, are at a higher risk of falling victim to exploitation. Traffickers prey on their limited access to employment opportunities and lack of support systems, often compounded by an insecure immigration status. Research has also found that children who are in care, or who go missing from home or care facilities, are more vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.

Demand for Cheap Labour: The demand for cheap labour in various sectors, including agriculture, construction, and hospitality, creates opportunities for exploitative practices. Unscrupulous employers may exploit vulnerable workers by paying them low wages, subjecting them to poor working conditions, and denying them basic rights.

Gangs and Organised Crime: Criminal networks and gangs engage in human trafficking and forced labour as profitable illegal activities, exploiting individuals for financial gain.

Globalisation and Migration: Increased global mobility and migration create opportunities for traffickers to exploit vulnerable individuals seeking better opportunities in new countries.

Social Inequality: Disparities in wealth and power can make marginalised communities more susceptible to exploitation, as traffickers take advantage of the lack of resources and access to justice. For example, evidence has shown that lack of support from authorities on housing, economic situation, mental or education creates a vacuum that can leave children vulnerable to criminal gangs and exploitation in county lines.

Lack of Awareness and Reporting: Many cases of modern slavery go unnoticed due to the hidden nature of the crime and lack of awareness among the public and frontline professionals. Victims may also fear retaliation or distrust authorities, preventing them from reporting the abuse.

Government Attitudes & Action: The UK's 'hostile environment' and recent legislation, such as the Nationality and Borders Act, mean people trafficked from abroad are often treated as immigration offenders, instead of being given the support and care they need to recover from their ordeal. Cuts to public services further hamper efforts to prevent exploitation, and mean the authorities often lack the resources they need to investigate trafficking cases.