

Improving the police and policy response to modern slavery

This project aims to redefine what realistic outcomes for policing modern slavery should look like.

Key details

Lead institution	Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre
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Police region	Yorkshire
Collaboration and partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater Manchester Police • Greater Manchester Probation Service • South Yorkshire Police
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	May 2024
Date due for completion	July 2026

Research context

It is claimed there are over 100,000 people currently living in modern slavery in the UK. The public have been encouraged to 'see the signs' of modern slavery 'hiding in plain sight' and report them to the police. In practice, the number of defendants convicted of offences 'flagged' as modern slavery has yet to exceed 500 per year, and is considerably lower if the analysis is confined to convictions under the 2015 Modern Slavery Act. This small number of convictions contrasts sharply with the 17,000 or more, potential victims of modern slavery being considered within the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), the framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery,

at the end of 2023.

Whether this small number of prosecutions or the diminishing protections offered to potential victims of modern slavery are enough to reverse the scale of modern slavery is questionable. Many of the commitments made to protect victims in the 2015 Modern Slavery Act have been undermined by subsequent immigration legislation. Foreign national applicants within the NRM are at risk of being deemed 'a threat to public order' if they have been smuggled into the UK in secret, travelled on false documents, entered on tourist visas or if the government decides levels of illegal immigration into the UK are posing a threat to public services.

Research methodology

The project used a convergent mixed-methods design drawing on data sourced from police probation records, which also included reports to the NRM. The quantitative data consisted of 2000 modern slavery incidents and crimes recorded by police across a two-year period (January 2021 to December 2023). The qualitative data consisted of detailed case files of 26 police investigations and seven probation files on individuals who had been convicted of six key types of modern slavery:

- trafficking adults for sexual exploitation
- labour exploitation
- criminal exploitation
- county lines drug dealing and cuckooing
- domestic servitude
- cannabis cultivation

Project design

- an analysis of the process of attrition from report to charge, to see which kinds of cases were more likely to lead suspects being identified and prosecuted
- the analysis of probation case files and police investigation dossiers that documented what was known about suspects, victims and the impact of interventions to address vulnerabilities and risks of harm
- the development of focus group schedules relating to six key types of modern slavery and their utilisation to invite both people with lived experience of exploitation and professional groups intervening in this field to explain what more should be done to prevent modern slavery

- a series of workshops and consultation to identify key recommendations, amounting to manifesto for preventing modern slavery

Research participation

The project is inviting both survivors of exploitation and professionals who work on modern slavery cases to participate in focus groups.

It also invites policymakers to consider the recommendations of survivors and professionals with a view to developing a more preventative approach to modern slavery in national policy.

References

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Additional resources

[Project website](#)