# Modern slavery victims in UK increasingly avoid protection services over deportation fears



Research reveals a troubling trend regarding modern slavery victims in the UK, with many choosing to remain with their exploiters rather than seek government support designed to protect them. This alarming finding, highlighted by the independent anti-slavery commissioner Eleanor Lyons, underscores a system that, according to her, is “deeply broken”. A decade after the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act, the original intent of the legislation is being undermined by fears surrounding immigration enforcement.

Recent studies, including one from Nottingham University’s Rights Lab, show that cases of trafficking victims opting out of support have reached record levels. The report, soon to be published, indicates a staggering increase of over 630% in the number of notifications from potential victims who refuse government help since 2016. From only 762 cases in 2016, this figure soared to 5,598 by 2024. The growing distrust in the system has led many individuals seeking assistance to view the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) as a potential trap that might expose them to immigration enforcement rather than a source of protection.

The detrimental impact of strict immigration policies has resonated deeply among potential victims. According to the research, fear of deportation stands as the primary reason for this hesitation to engage with support services. Such policies, particularly those enacted in 2023, have compounded the challenges faced by victims and have fostered an environment ripe for exploitation. Government return agreements with countries like Albania and Vietnam, which rank high in trafficking statistics, exacerbate this fear, further deterring individuals from coming forward. In the past year, victims of trafficking have even received notices indicating potential deportation to Rwanda, deepening their reluctance to seek help.

Additionally, a second report from the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre confirms that prosecutions for modern slavery offences remain alarmingly low. Despite the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act, the rate of convictions persists at just 1.8% of potential victims referred to the NRM. This statistic highlights a disconnect between the intended protections of the legislation and the grim reality facing survivors. Alicia Heys, an academic from the University of Hull involved in the study, emphasised that the act was designed to ensure harsh penalties for perpetrators, yet the ongoing low conviction rates paint a worrying picture of failure to deliver justice.

As Lyons noted poignantly, “When fear of deportation outweighs the promise of protection... something is deeply broken.” The paradox of a system meant to safeguard victims but instead driving them back into exploitation calls for immediate reform. The ramifications of this ongoing crisis extend beyond individual lives. The Salvation Army also clarified that a decrease in victims accessing government support services—22% in the past year—indicates that traffickers are becoming more adept at keeping individuals trapped within their grasp.

The perception that modern slavery issues are conflated with immigration control further complicates the situation. Not only do victims hesitate to report their circumstances out of fear, but the stricter eligibility requirements introduced recently have meant fewer individuals qualify as victims. This governmental shift significantly hampers the fight against exploitation, aligning with broader human rights concerns voiced by various experts, charities, and legal authorities.

The recent proposals under the Illegal Migration Bill threaten to further exacerbate these issues. If passed in its current form, the bill could prevent victims from accessing critical support, risking their safety and well-being. Activists and survivors alike have expressed deep concerns over the government’s direction, urging a realignment of priorities towards treating modern slavery as a human rights issue rather than an immigration problem.

In the face of grim statistics and alarming trends, experts and survivors call for urgent reform. The need for a system that genuinely protects victims of modern slavery is more pressing than ever; without it, countless lives remain at risk, trapped in a cycle of exploitation and fear.

### Reference Map

1. [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/09/modern-slavery-victims-opt-to-stay-with-exploiters-for-fear-of-deportation-research-finds)
2. [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uks-tougher-immigration-policy-risks-trapping-victims-modern-slavery-2025-02-07/)
3. [[3]](https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/news/modern-slavery-victims-too-fearful-seek-help)
4. [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/mar/27/trafficking-modern-slavery-victims-the-migration-bill-will-leave-behind)
5. [[5]](https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/news/modern-slavery-survivors-write-pm-fears-bill)
6. [[6]](https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/news/modern-slavery-victims-too-fearful-seek-help)
7. [[7]](https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/news/modern-slavery-survivors-write-pm-fears-bill)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/09/modern-slavery-victims-opt-to-stay-with-exploiters-for-fear-of-deportation-research-finds> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uks-tougher-immigration-policy-risks-trapping-victims-modern-slavery-2025-02-07/> - Britain's 2015 Modern Slavery Act, once a cornerstone in the global fight against human trafficking, has seen its protections eroded by new immigration rules introduced in 2023 aimed at curbing illegal migration. The heightened proof requirements for state support have resulted in a significant rise in the rejection rate of modern slavery claims, leaving thousands of victims without assistance and deterring others from seeking help due to fears of deportation. Concerns have been raised by numerous experts, including charities, law enforcement, the judiciary, and government officials, who argue that modern slavery is a human rights issue and should not be conflated with immigration control. Despite appeals to amend the legislation, the new Labour government has maintained the stance of the previous Conservative administration. The disparity in first-stage approval rates between British nationals and foreigners, alongside the rise in reconsideration requests being accepted, casts doubt on the efficacy and fairness of the current system. Experts warn that the stricter regulations may hinder efforts to combat exploitation and support victims, thereby perpetuating modern slavery within the country.
3. <https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/news/modern-slavery-victims-too-fearful-seek-help> - New figures released today show that fewer modern slavery victims in England and Wales are accessing Government specialist support. The Salvation Army is warning the decrease shows criminals are finding it easier to keep people trapped while the vile trade in human life is still prevalent in the UK today. The figures released today to mark Anti-Slavery days show that for the first time in thirteen years, there has been a 22% decrease in the number of people accessing the modern slavery support services The Salvation Army runs on behalf of the Government. Record numbers of people are turning down the opportunity to be referred to specialist support to recover by choosing not to enter the Government system for identifying and supporting victims, known as the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). The downturn in people coming to The Salvation Army for help is attributed to recent changes in law conflating modern slavery with immigration, making victims fearful that contact with official authorities will lead to prison or removal. In addition, stricter eligibility criteria have meant fewer people are being recognised as victims of modern slavery and so unable to access vital support. Concerned that victims are being pushed back into the hands of the traffickers, The Salvation Army estimates that for every one survivor of modern slavery given the opportunity to receive support, at least thirteen more remain trapped and exploited. Modern slavery is not an immigration issue; it is a human rights issue. Indeed, British people are the second most common group accessing our help. We need to encourage every person exploited in slavery to break free by treating them as genuine victims of crime.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/mar/27/trafficking-modern-slavery-victims-the-migration-bill-will-leave-behind> - With Julia’s help, Surrey police were able to bring four members of the criminal gang to trial, securing a rare conviction under the 2015 Modern Slavery Act and prison sentences. Julia has now been granted asylum and reunited with her daughter. “I’m happy [I helped the police]” she says. “There will always be new bosses coming but many women are now safe.” Yet lawyers and anti-trafficking groups say that the police’s ability to investigate and bring modern slavery cases such as Julia’s to court could be irreparably damaged, and victims like Julia criminalised and deported, if the government’s new illegal migration bill, which is being debated in parliament, becomes law. Under the proposed bill, anyone entering the country illegally will be subject to arrest, detention and deportation and unable to claim asylum. The government has also laid out plans in the bill to remove the right of those entering the country illegally from accessing any support services currently offered to modern slavery victims. “I’m hugely concerned that we have legislation going through parliament that will deny modern slavery victims access to support and protection that has not a shred of evidence behind it,” says Andrew Wallis, chief executive of Unseen, a charity fighting modern slavery in the UK. Trafficked: the trap – part one Read more He says that under the proposed bill, someone like Julia who entered the country illegally could be criminalised, detained and removed before she was able to help the police and would be given no access to the support services currently available to those identified as potential victims of trafficking. “There has been a deliberate conflating of immigration, smuggling and trafficking by this government, who are now saying that victims of serious crime will not have access to justice or the support they need purely based on the way that they entered the country, which if they are a victim of trafficking, was usually through force or coercive, deceptive or fraudulent means.” Home Office figures show that there were more than 21,000 potential victims of trafficking, slavery and forced labour reported in 2022. Under the Modern Slavery Act, traffickers can be given a life sentence for their crimes. Yet modern slavery cases are some of the most difficult to bring to court and prosecution rates have proved stubbornly low. Ministry of Justice data shows that in 2021 there were only 93 prosecutions and 33 convictions in cases where modern slavery was the principal offence.
5. <https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/news/modern-slavery-survivors-write-pm-fears-bill> - A group of survivors of modern slavery who are supported by The Salvation Army and its partners have written to the Prime Minister to outline their fears that the Illegal Migration Bill will have a negative impact on survivors in the future if it passes without change. The survivors, who asked The Salvation Army to pass on their letter to the Prime Minister, explain how they may not be alive today had they not been sheltered in safehouses and given specialist support to recover from their abuse. They fear the Illegal Migration Bill will prevent other victims being able to access the lifesaving support they received. The group of survivors sign the letter using only initials or pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity as threats and brutal treatment by their traffickers have left them in fear of disclosing their real names in public. However, they were determined to advocate for people trapped in slavery now and in the future.
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