# UK police criticised for failing to prioritise organised Channel migrant smuggling



A recent report highlights alarming deficiencies in the UK’s handling of migrant arrivals via the English Channel, revealing that tens of thousands evade thorough police checks and are often not even questioned by officials upon arrival. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary expressed "surprise and concern" that most organised human trafficking gangs are considered "low priority" by law enforcement, leading to a serious oversight in preventing illegal migration.

The investigation found that only one in 15 migrants are interviewed about their connections to smugglers. Rather than mandating interviews, migrants are encouraged to participate voluntarily. This lackadaisical approach drew sharp criticism from Labour's Shadow Home Secretary, Chris Philp, who described the government's response—a new taskforce led by a deputy chief constable—as insufficient. He stated, "Illegal migration facilitated by these groups should be the top priority for the police and the National Crime Agency," and dismissed the government’s efforts as "laughable," suggesting that they were falling short in addressing the critical issue of organised immigration crime.

The report further noted that the Border Force, which handles new arrivals at the Manston facility in Kent, lacks access to the Police National Database (PND). This gap means that previous criminals among the migrants could go unrecognised, posing a significant risk to public safety. The PND contains over 6.2 billion records, including millions of images of known criminals. Without utilising this resource, the report asserts, valuable opportunities to gather intelligence are being squandered. Counter-terrorism units also expressed concern over the inadequacies of automated facial-recognition technology for identifying potential suspects among new arrivals.

Interviewing migrants has proven problematic; in 2023, less than half of the 5,000 approached agreed to be interviewed. The committee report highlighted that irregular migrants could provide critical intelligence on smuggling operations, yet the Home Office unit lacks the authority to enforce interviews. Inspectors found that many organised migration crimes hadn't historically received the urgency they deserve, largely due to a misplaced belief that this was solely the responsibility of Immigration Enforcement.

Furthermore, the report critiques the British government's focus on small boat crossings as disproportionately overshadowing other significant aspects of immigration enforcement. According to the inspectors, while immediate threats from boat crossings are acknowledged, this focus risks neglecting clandestine vehicle entries and other avenues of immigration crime. Various organisations involved in combatting human trafficking reportedly operate under disconnected IT systems, complicating collaboration and diminishing efficacy.

Amidst these concerns, the UK’s efforts to tackle human trafficking and illegal migration face additional hurdles due to recent legislative changes. The 2015 Modern Slavery Act, initially a model for eradicating human trafficking, has been undermined by new immigration policies, which have increased the burden of proof for state support and diminished protections for victims. This shift has resulted in higher rejection rates for claims of modern slavery, leaving many without crucial assistance and deterring others from seeking help for fear of deportation.

The complexities surrounding Channel crossings have also stirred international tensions. Migrant tragedies in the Channel have accentuated frayed relations between the UK and France. Reports indicate that various deaths have occurred during crossings, with increasing accusations against French law enforcement for aggressive tactics aimed at preventing these dangerous journeys. Critics argue that this heavy-handed approach fails to address the root causes of migration—namely, poverty and oppression in origin countries.

In response to the continuous rise in migrant crossings, the UK government plans to introduce stricter measures targeting people smugglers, including severe restrictions on suspected individuals' movements and communications. These new policies, however, have met with criticism; opponents argue that without addressing the systemic issues fueling migration and ensuring safe and humane treatment for migrants, the measures may be more punitive than effective.

With fluctuating migration patterns reflecting both domestic policy shifts and broader geopolitical influences, it is increasingly clear that a reevaluation of current strategies is indispensable. Stakeholders—ranging from law enforcement to humanitarian organisations—must converge to create integrated responses that not only target smuggling operations but also provide robust support for victims trapped within a cycle of exploitation.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1-2, 5-6
2. Paragraph 4
3. Paragraph 3
4. Paragraph 8
5. Paragraph 7
6. Paragraph 9

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14716889/Channel-small-boat-migrants-not-checked-against-police-database-REFUSE-interviewed.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - 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.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/04/02/migrant-deaths-french-british-channel-cooperation-in-question_6667171_23.html> - Recurring migration tragedies in the English Channel have strained French-British cooperation. Migrants, driven by poverty and repression, attempt dangerous sea crossings from France to the UK, often resulting in deaths. In the first quarter of 2024 alone, at least 10 migrants died. The British Conservative government has pressured French authorities to curb these crossings, leading to aggressive police tactics. A joint investigation by Le Monde and Lighthouse Reports highlighted police misconduct, including breaking into boats and creating waves to prevent departures. A Syrian migrant died due to police action, and the French Navy is suspected of obstructing the investigation into the drowning of 27 people in November 2021. With smugglers exploiting migrants' desperation and the current legal framework requiring French enforcement of British border security, both nations face criticism. London's financial incentives to France have intensified law enforcement practices, drawing parallels to EU deals with Turkey and Libya. Addressing these tragedies requires combating traffickers and ensuring human rights while reevaluating French-British border cooperation to reduce tensions.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/8f9d45c4-1f4d-4260-af63-033c37ead1bf> - The UK government plans to introduce measures targeting people smugglers, including travel bans and social media restrictions, in response to a 25% increase in migrant arrivals via the English Channel in 2024. The new measures, part of an upcoming border security and immigration bill, will introduce interim serious crime prevention orders allowing law enforcement to immediately impose restrictions on suspected smugglers. These orders could include bans on computer and phone usage, social media access, and associations with certain individuals, with breaches punishable by up to five years in prison. The announcement follows the arrival of 36,816 migrants in 2024, up from 29,437 in 2023. The Labour government, led by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, has focused on dismantling smuggling networks and improving cooperation with European allies, abandoning the previous Conservative government's controversial Rwanda relocation scheme. Critics, however, argue that Labour has failed to control illegal immigration, with crossings remaining a significant issue.
5. <https://apnews.com/article/b09e35709e13d7c5677dbd717934b080> - A French report by the Court of Accounts criticizes the UK's coordination with France in curbing migrant crossings over the English Channel, labeling the effectiveness of existing cooperation as "uncertain." France reportedly struggles to obtain usable information from the UK regarding the departure of migrants in small boats, which has led to an imbalance in intelligence exchange. Despite joint efforts such as a 2020 intelligence unit that dismantled seven smuggling networks in 2022, the UK Home Office rejects these allegations, asserting that the report is outdated and misrepresents current cooperation levels. Additionally, while the number of migrants crossing the English Channel decreased in 2023, whether this decline is due to governmental actions or adverse weather conditions remains uncertain. The French report also highlights broader issues in France's immigration policies, including the low implementation rate of deportation orders, emphasizing the need for more efficient policies, and cooperation to encourage voluntary returns of migrants.
6. <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/europe/article/2024/04/02/channel-crossings-are-on-the-rise_6667176_143.html> - After a 35% decrease in 2023, Channel crossings between France and the UK have surged again at the beginning of 2024, with over 4,600 migrants reaching England. March 20 saw 514 people crossing in 10 boats, and at least 10 people have died so far this year. This resurgence returns to 2022 numbers when over 45,000 migrants crossed. French authorities attributed the 2023 decline to effective police actions and an agreement with Albania which dramatically reduced Albanian crossings. In 2024, Afghans, Iranians, and Vietnamese constitute nearly half of the crossing migrants. Boats in 2024 have become more overcrowded, raising capsizing risks. French police have thwarted 69% of crossing attempts and reported increased violence from smugglers. Truck smuggling has also tripled, particularly involving Sudanese and Eritrean nationals. Spring is expected to see further smuggling activity due to better weather conditions.