



Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline

MODERN SLAVERY DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC



COVID 19 IMPACT

BY UNSEEN

operators of the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline

This report provides an overview of the nature and scale of contacts to the Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline for the six month period between 23 March 2020 and 23 September 2020. During this period, the UK experienced various stages of lockdown which undoubtedly created a unique environment that none of us has seen in our lifetimes. Despite the lockdown, many vulnerable individuals were still being held in exploitative situations and this report seeks to provide an understanding of the impact of the pandemic on those contacting the Helpline for advice and support.

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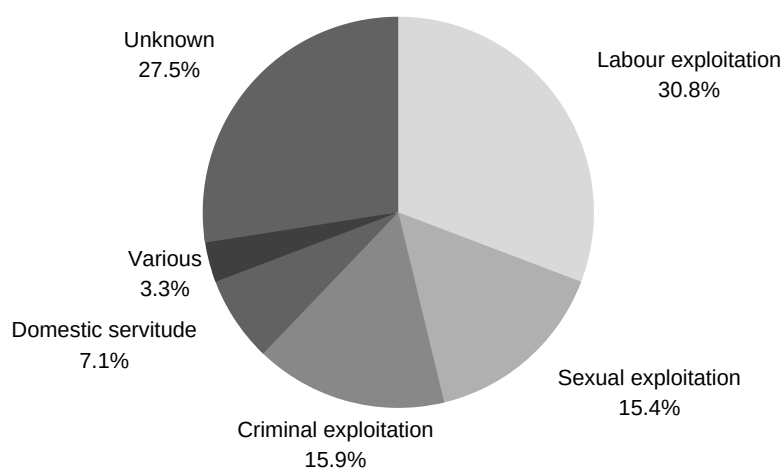
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Between 23 March 2020 and 23 September 2020 the Helpline responded to 2,942 calls, 790 online reports and 30 app submissions, making a total of **3,762** inbound contacts during that time compared to 8,494 contacts for the same period in 2019. A total of **848** modern slavery cases were raised by the Helpline for situations where indicators suggested that modern slavery was or had been taking place. Within these 848 cases, a total of **1,645** potential victims were indicated. Although there was a significant dip in contacts to the



Breakdown of modern slavery cases

The Helpline recorded 77 cases where the pandemic was directly cited as an influencing factor by the person contacting the Helpline. 29 were recorded as modern slavery cases, 43 as non-modern* slavery cases, and 5 as general information cases. The majority of these cases reference workers in labour abuse or exploitation situations who were being made to work at the height of the pandemic despite lockdown restrictions, with lack of social distancing or heightened personal protective equipment (PPE). This was reported across a range of sectors, including agriculture, factories (including Leicester textile factories), construction and also in commercial sex situations.

Although the overall total number of modern slavery cases raised during the time period was not dissimilar to those in the previous year, the nature of the cases differed slightly.

Helpline, for the number of cases raised, this is comparable to the number of cases in the same time period in 2019, 848 cases versus 884 cases in 2019. However, interestingly the number of potential victims indicated in the respective timeframes differed with significantly less potential victims indicated during 2020 - 1,645 compared to the same time period in 2019 - 2,410.

Overview

In respect of labour exploitation cases, 261 cases were indicated during the six month period in 2020 but this figure was much higher in 2019 at 463. However, the number of unknown cases was higher in 2020 at 233 compared to 2019 when the figure was 157, which may account for some of the difference in the number of labour exploitation cases raised. There were a similar number of cases indicating various exploitation types with 28 during the six month period in 2020 and 27 for the same period in 2019.



Interestingly, the number of cases indicating situations of domestic servitude were exactly the same with 60 being reported in both 2019 and 2020 for the same period.

Cases relating to criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation were higher in 2020 than in 2019 with 135 and 131 cases respectively indicated in 2020 compared to 88 and 89 cases respectively in 2019. Other points of note include a slight percentage increase in the number of sexual exploitation cases reported from 12% in 2019 to 15.4% during the same six-month period. Many of these cases cite the risks associated with individuals being forced to continue working as a sex worker during the pandemic.



Labour exploitation is the most common form of exploitation reported to the Helpline. It may be surprising to note that, during the pandemic, this trend did not change. Despite many industries and sectors being affected by complete closures for a period of time, **261** cases were raised by the Helpline relating to reported instances of labour exploitation, indicating **968** potential victims during the period of this report. This is compared to 463 cases for the same period in 2019.

Breakdown of labour exploitation cases

Construction	57	209	Retail	10	15
Car Wash	45	164	Beauty/spa	5	15
Hospitality	31	71	Utilities	2	2
Agriculture	19	140	Care	2	5
Repairs/maint	14	21	Maritime	1	1
Transportation	12	42	Services	1	1
Manufacturing	11	191	Recycling	2	2
Domestic work	11	23	Other	38	66

When looking at the breakdown of labour exploitation cases during the first six months of the pandemic period there are some notable differences in the number of cases indicated in the various labour sectors and industries. For example, 19 cases relating to agriculture were recorded by the Helpline for the period against 24 agricultural cases reported for the whole of 2019. Equally, in manufacturing for the whole of 2019 the Helpline raised 13 cases, however during the six-month pandemic period the Helpline indicated 11 cases relating to manufacturing. Construction was also a sector where there was a prevalence of cases indicated during the pandemic period with 57 cases - compared to 51 cases for the same period in 2019. Even more notable, but to be expected given the closure of establishments, the most affected sectors were car washes and nail bars. In the six months of 2019, the Helpline raised a total of 245 car wash cases and 52 beauty/spa cases compared to 45 and 5 respectively during the six month pandemic period.

Labour Abuse

Although labour abuse is not classed as modern slavery it is very much on the spectrum and often indicates where further exploitation may be occurring. During the six month pandemic period the Helpline raised a total of 280 cases where labour abuse was indicated. This equates roughly to 22% of cases and is lower than the percentage of labour abuse cases the Helpline saw in 2019 at 35%. The total number of labour abuse cases indicated in 2019 was 1,112, suggesting that the Helpline is likely to see fewer labour abuse cases in total reported throughout 2020 than in previous years.

The most prevalent sector indicated in labour abuse was construction with 32 cases. This is compared to 104 cases during the whole of 2019. Those sectors where the Helpline has seen significantly fewer reported instances are hospitality with 22 cases compared to 184 in 2019, retail with 6 cases compared to 47 in 2019, and beauty/spa with 6 cases compared to 50 in 2019. The fewer number of cases reported in hospitality and beauty/spas is to be expected with many of these types of venues completely closed for business during the six month pandemic period.

Given the drop in reporting of issues in some sectors and an increase in others the Helpline has been continuing to assess whether those indicated in exploitative situations are being moved to wherever there is demand. From a closer analysis of a small number cases it would appear that this is the case, with potential victims reporting being moved to other locations and venues to continue working.



Case Study

A business working with Unseen identified a potential forced labour situation in the food processing industry.

The situation involved a Irana*, Romanian female potential victim, who was being exploited by a 'friend' who had asked her to come to the UK to work with her. Irana eventually disclosed to a member of staff at the food processing site that her documents had been confiscated and she was very scared. Her passport, ID and birth certificate had been taken by the exploiter after supposedly owing her a debt of £365. Irana also lived with the exploiter and both were working at the same food processing factory during the pandemic.

The Helpline spoke to Irana in person following the initial call. She explained that she knew the exploiter from back home in Romania and had been asked to come to the UK with her to help look after her child while she worked. Irana understood that she would be registered as the child's carer.

The exploiter paid for Irana's travel and said she would not be charged for rent or food. However, upon arrival, the exploiter asked Irana to pay her back for the travel and clothing provided. Irana's ID documents were taken and kept in the exploiter's room and she was prevented from accessing them. Irana did have access to her own phone until the exploiter smashed it one day in anger. The exploiter also took Irana's bank card.

Irana was continuously monitored by the exploiter and was threatened with harm to her family in Romania if she didn't do as she was told. The exploiter got angry with Irana when she said she had befriended someone at work and subsequently stopped her from leaving the house.

Although she wanted to get out of the situation, Irana said she was scared to go back to the exploiter's house to get her belongings as she felt the exploiter would not let her leave. The Helpline then spoke with police to arrange an extraction and explain the process for entering Irana into Government-funded support services. Irana was removed safely from the situation by the police and was put into safe accommodation. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, the Helpline worked successfully with the business and the police to ensure the safety of Irana.

*Name changed to protect identity†

If you need help or advice about any modern slavery or exploitation issue contact the Modern slavery & Exploitation Helpline on 08000 121 700