

Press release

Embargo: 00.01am, Wednesday 7 April 2021

Slavery helpline records “alarming” increase in sexual and criminal exploitation during pandemic

- **Reports of sexual exploitation up by 25% in 2020, according to new figures from the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline**
- **Reports of criminal exploitation up by 42% for the same period**
- **More children involved in slavery than ever before**
- **Figures especially concerning given a decline in overall cases reported to the Helpline during the pandemic**

Reports of sexual and criminal exploitation increased dramatically during the pandemic, according to new figures on the state of modern slavery in the UK.

The figures, published this week (7 April 2021), are part of the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline Annual Assessment, a yearly stock take on UK slavery and human trafficking.

Despite an overall drop in contacts to the Helpline, reports of sexual exploitation were up 25% on the previous year, with nearly a quarter of potential victims being children.

Criminal exploitation, meanwhile, was up by 42%, with a fifth of potential victims being minors. Criminal exploitation includes drugs-related activity, including County Lines, forced shoplifting and forced begging.

Data from the Helpline, which is run by the anti-slavery charity Unseen, helps to shed light on the nature and scale of the problem in the UK.

Its Annual Assessment, which includes data for every policing area in the UK, is one of the most detailed reports produced by the sector. It is used by other charities, the police, local and national governments and others to inform policy and respond directly to reports of slavery and human trafficking.

The 2020 Assessment will be launched on Wednesday by Dame Sara Thornton, UK Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. Findings include:

- Nearly 8,000 contacts in 2020 from victims, professionals working in services such as the NHS, businesses and members of the public
- A potential 3,481 victims of modern slavery were indicated as a result of this contact
- 10% of victims were children, up from 7% in 2019.
- Despite fewer contacts to the Helpline during the pandemic (down nearly 14% to 7,976), the number of modern slavery cases remains fairly consistent: 1,742 in 2020, compared to 1,812 in 2019
- Potential victims came from 80 nationalities, with Romania being most common, followed by China, Albania and England
- There was 95% increase in reports related to modern slavery in cannabis farms, compared to 2019

Says Justine Currell, Executive Director of Unseen and co-author of the Assessment:

“A year on from the first lockdown, the number of reports relating to sexual and criminal exploitation, and those involving children, is particularly alarming, given that overall contacts to the Helpline decreased during the pandemic.

“Covid19 and the subsequent economic downturn affected the visibility of the threat in such places as car washes and nail bars. And as you would expect, the proportion of calls from the general public declined during the lockdowns. But this report shows that modern slavery and human trafficking is still alive and unfortunately thriving.

“There is still a general lack of awareness of modern slavery, which could involve as many as 100,000 people in the UK alone, so it’s vital we all learn more about the issue and how to spot the signs of exploitation.”

Says Dame Sara Thornton:

“The Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline has provided an important alternative mechanism for those in situations of modern slavery or exploitation to seek help and support. Over the past year I have also been particularly impressed with their efforts to produce thematic reports on areas of risk.”

Notes to editors

More information

For all press enquiries and to see an advance proof copy of the report, contact: 0303 040 2888 (out of hours 07943 498239)

media@unseenuk.org

Expert interviews

Interviews available with Justine Currell, Executive Director of Unseen and co-author of the report.

Regional statistics available

The Helpline includes statistics for 45 police force areas in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

About the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline 08000 121700

- The Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline is part of the leading anti-slavery charity Unseen, www.unseenuk.org
- It is confidential and independent, providing information, advice and guidance to potential victims, businesses, statutory agencies such as the NHS and police, and the public about any modern slavery issue.
- The Helpline is free to use, can take calls in more than 200 languages, and operates 24/7, 365 days a year.
- People can also contact the Helpline via the website and the Unseen App.
- Since its launch in October 2016 The Helpline has indicated more than 20,000 potential victims of modern slavery.
- The Helpline receives no Government funding, relying instead on grants from trusts, businesses, fellow charities and other organisations, and donations from the general public.

www.modernslaveryhelpline.org

www.unseenuk.org

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