

Press release

Embargo: 00.01am, Tuesday 5 April 2022

Slavery helpline reveals increase in sexual exploitation for third year running – and warns that Ukraine war could lead to even more victims

Reports of sexual exploitation, where people are forced into prostitution and performing sexual acts, have jumped by 15% over the past year, according to new figures on the state of modern slavery in the UK.

The findings – which show a significant increase for the third year running – come amid warnings that the Ukraine war will make the situation worse, as vulnerable women and child refugees are preyed upon by traffickers.

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

“The continued increase in reports of sexual exploitation is extremely worrying, and the Ukraine war could add fuel to the fire.

“In a refugee crisis, when there are many vulnerable people on the move, you’ll find criminals trying to exploit the situation – and that includes human traffickers.”

The figures, published this week (5 April 2022), are part of the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline Annual Assessment, a yearly stocktake of UK slavery and human trafficking.

Findings include:

- Nearly 8,500ⁱ contacts in 2021 from victims, professionals working in services such as the NHS, businesses and members of the public
- A potential 3,019 victims of modern slavery indicated as a result of this contact
- 6.4% of victims were children
- A 51% increase in the number of modern slavery cases where a potential victim contacted the Helpline themselves
- Potential victims came from 76 nationalities, with Romania being the most common, followed by Vietnam, China, Albania and Sudan.

Data from the Helpline, which is run by the anti-slavery charity Unseen, helps to shed light on the nature and scale of slavery in the UK where, experts estimate, there are up to 136,000 in slavery at any one time.ⁱⁱ

The Helpline’s Annual Assessment, which includes figures for every nation and region in the UKⁱⁱⁱ, is one of the most detailed reports produced by the sector.

Data is used by other charities, the police, local and national governments and businesses to inform policy and respond directly to reports of slavery and human trafficking.

The Helpline is free, staffed by trained advisors and operates around the clock.

Says Justine Currell: “The bulk of the reports we’re getting about sexual exploitation are tip-offs about private addresses as well as online ads where the sex buyer has reported something to us.

“This crime is well hidden, yet often right under our noses. I urge the public to contact us if they have the slightest suspicions about anything they’ve seen.

“I’m encouraged by the huge increase in potential victims of slavery contacting us this year for help and support, which make up a much bigger proportion of contacts than previous years. This suggests we’re getting our number out to the right people.

“But we also rely on the public and frontline workers in places like the NHS and police to contact us about anything they’ve seen.

“You can see the signs of slavery to look out for on our website, but if you are worried about anything, it’s always best to get in touch.”

The 2021 Assessment will be published on Tuesday 5 April 2022.

Notes to editors

More information

For all press enquiries and to see an advance copy of the report, contact Dominic Murphy at media@unseenuk.org or phone 0303 040 2888 (out of hours 07943 498239).

Expert interviews

Interviews available with Justine Currell, 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 staffed by specialists, 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 24,000 potential victims^{iv} 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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ⁱ 8,488. This is a 6.4% increase on the total for 2020

ⁱⁱ <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/about/the-five-pathways/modern-slavery#:~:text=Global%20Slavery%20Index%202018%20estimated,of%202018%20%E2%80%93%206%2C895%20potential%20victims>

ⁱⁱⁱ By police force area

^{iv} Figures from October 2016 to October 2021