

Press release

UK's modern slavery response weakened by immigration legislation, says leading NGO

Immigration legislation has undermined the fight against modern slavery, deterring victims from coming forward and allowing traffickers to operate with greater impunity, according to research.

A report by anti-slavery charity Unseen, 'Restoring belief, reducing criminality', examines the impact of modern slavery provisions in the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, Illegal Migration Act 2023, and Safety of Rwanda Act 2024.

Drawing on Home Office data, insights from the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline, and interviews with police, frontline professionals and survivors, the research finds that policies designed to curb irregular migration have instead weakened victim protection and law enforcement capability.

Unseen's analysis highlights how there is no evidence of widespread abuse of the UK's modern slavery identification system. However, a growing culture of disbelief in potential victims – reflected in higher evidential thresholds and new disqualifications from support – has made it significantly harder for victims to be identified, helped and protected. As a result, many survivors disengage from authorities altogether, allowing traffickers to use fear and silence to maintain control and avoid detection.

The report warns that misclassifying modern slavery as an immigration issue obscures its reality as a serious economic crime linked to fraud, money laundering, drug offences, violence and exploitation within UK communities. Where victims are denied recognition or support, investigations collapse and perpetrators remain beyond reach.

Key findings include:

1. Victims of modern slavery have become the focus of efforts to combat organised immigration crime, wasting UK resources to wrongly penalise people subject to trafficking rather than the criminal gangs who exploit them.
2. Policies have failed to address irregular migration and instead enable traffickers to move people into and around the UK with little risk of detection.
3. Trust between victims and authorities has collapsed, increasing the likelihood that survivors disengage, disappear, or enter irregular work to survive.
4. Recent policies prevent the accurate identification of modern slavery occurrence and limit the opportunity law enforcement has to pursue offenders – potentially in violation of international law.
5. UK nationals, including children groomed and exploited within the UK, are now less likely to be recognised as victims or to access statutory support.



Unseen is calling on the government to separate modern slavery from immigration policy, restore early access to support for potential victims, and strengthen law enforcement by embedding financial investigation into every modern slavery case.

Andrew Wallis OBE, CEO of Unseen, said: “Modern slavery is not an immigration loophole. It is a serious, high-harm crime. Yet recent legislation has tilted the system away from victims and towards traffickers. Our evidence shows that when survivors are met with suspicion rather than belief, they disappear from view and criminal gangs are free to operate. Restoring belief is not about lowering the bar. It is about restoring justice and giving the UK a fighting chance to tackle exploitation properly.”

Unseen has published an executive policy brief for ministers, officials and policymakers, alongside a detailed evidence summary, setting out practical recommendations to restore victim trust, protect survivors’ rights and strengthen the UK’s response to modern slavery.

Unseen is urging political leaders and policymakers to move away from narratives that conflate trafficking with migration, and to refocus efforts on disrupting criminal exploitation and supporting those harmed by it.

This latest research from Unseen follows a report published by the charity in October 2025 on the [economic cost of modern slavery](#). According to the report, the socio-economic impact of modern slavery on the UK is up to £60bn a year, with the cost to police forces reaching £210m in 2024.

ENDS

Notes to editors

For media enquiries, please contact media@unseenuk.org or call 07951 678152.

Copies of the executive policy brief and evidence summary are available upon request.

To request an interview with a modern slavery expert from Unseen, please contact the media team using the details above.

About Unseen

[Unseen](#) is a UK charity with its head office in Bristol. We provide safe houses and support in the community for survivors of trafficking and modern slavery. We also run the UK [Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline](#) and work with individuals, communities, business, governments, other charities and statutory agencies to stamp out slavery for good.



About Andrew Wallis OBE

[Andrew Wallis OBE](#) is the founding CEO of Unseen and an internationally renowned expert on modern slavery. He chaired the landmark Centre for Social Justice report 'It happens here', widely acknowledged as the catalyst for the UK Modern Slavery Act of 2015, advising on its development. He was awarded an OBE that year for his work combatting human trafficking.