

understanding modern slavery

Your guide to modern
slavery across the world
and in the UK in 2026



this guide will help you answer:

- ☐ What is modern slavery?
- ☐ What does it look like?
- ☐ Who does it affect?
- ☐ Is there anything I can do to stop it?

Many assume that slavery ended with the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade more than 200 years ago. Unfortunately, this isn't the case. Not only does slavery still exist – it is a significant crime that is evolving fast*.

It affects everyone and it is everywhere. As you interact with your community, if you have a phone, eat food, or wear clothes then you are connected to modern slavery. It is part of our everyday life, woven into the supply chains of most industries we rely on and hidden in public settings.

In this guide, we will answer eight key questions about exploitation across the world and in the UK in 2026. We will break down five common myths about modern slavery, separating fact from fiction.

*House of Lords (2024) The Modern Slavery Act: becoming world-leading again.

what is modern slavery?

Modern slavery is a crime. It occurs when a person is turned into a commodity and exploited for someone else's gain.

Many victims are deceived by false promises, threats and coercion, only to find themselves forced to do things they do not want to, they are stuck, controlled, and stripped of their freedom. Modern slavery can include many things including being forced to work for very little or no pay, working and living in unsafe conditions, having wages or documents withheld, being physically harmed and having freedom of movement or communication restricted.

Unlike drugs or armaments, a person can be bought and sold over and over again, making modern slavery highly profitable. As one of the largest criminal industries in the world, it is estimated that \$236bn (£175.8bn) a year is generated from forced labour*.

There are an estimated 50 million people currently stuck in exploitation across the globe**.

does it happen in the UK?

A common misconception is that modern slavery only affects people outside of the UK. This is not true.

There are an estimated 130,000 people stuck in exploitation in the UK***. It can be found anywhere and in any industry. In towns, cities, and communities across the country, people in exploitation are washing our cars, painting our nails, picking our crops, tied in domestic servitude, sexually exploited and delivering our food.

*ILO (2024) Profits and poverty: The economics of forced labour.

**ILO (2022) Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage.

***House of Lords (2021) Modern Slavery Act 2015: An independent review of the Act.

Myth #1

“Modern slavery only affects people from outside the UK.”

The truth is British nationals are one of the largest groups of modern slavery victims in the UK. In 2023, UK government data showed British nationals made up 25% of all referral cases.

Modern slavery doesn't have a nationality - it can happen to anyone*.

Not only does modern slavery have a human cost – it is costing the UK's police forces, NHS, and the taxpayer. Unseen estimates that modern slavery is costing the UK £60bn a year, which is approximately 2% of GDP. This would be enough to build around 50 new hospitals or 750 new schools**.



*National Referral Mechanism, 2023

**Unseen (2025) The Economic Cost of Slavery: Policing.

what are the types of modern slavery?

Modern slavery is a complex and varied crime. It can take many different forms, including but not limited to:

Forced labour: this refers to any work or services which people are forced to do against their will under the threat of some form of punishment.

Sexual exploitation: this refers to when an adult or child is coerced, manipulated or forced into sexual acts or activities such as prostitution, sexual slavery or the creation of sexual images for someone else's benefit.

Criminal exploitation: this refers to individuals being forced into crimes such as cannabis cultivation, drug dealing, pick pocketing, forced begging, benefit fraud, or money laundering.

Domestic servitude: this refers to exploitation in private homes where victims are ill-treated, humiliated, and subjected to exhausting working hours and other forms of exploitation.

County lines: this refers to the method used by criminal gangs who exploit mobile phone lines to organise the movement and sale of illegal drugs across the UK. Children are often targeted – both online and offline – and forced to move and sell these drugs.

Myth #2

“Human trafficking and people smuggling are the same thing.”

The truth is people smuggling is something an individual consents to. It usually involves paying someone to move you across an international border. It is a crime against the state.

Human trafficking involves coercion, deception, or force. It can take place across international borders, between cities, within towns, and even on a single street. It is a crime against an individual.

who does modern slavery affect?

It can affect anyone. There is no typical victim of modern slavery. They can be men, women, and children of all ages, ethnicities, backgrounds, and nationalities.

Exploitation thrives on vulnerability. Common factors that make someone vulnerable include but are not exclusive to:

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| ☐ Homelessness | ☐ Breakups |
| ☐ Financial instability | ☐ Bereavement |
| ☐ Language barriers | ☐ Having a criminal record |
| ☐ Mental health challenges | ☐ Having a disability |
| ☐ Insecure immigration status or right to work | ☐ Poverty |
| ☐ Changes in personal circumstances | ☐ Age |



Exploiters often target these vulnerabilities, offering false promises of accommodation or work, then trapping individuals in situations they can't easily leave.

What's more, victims can often face more than one type of abuse and slavery, for example being sold on to another trafficker and then forced into another form of exploitation.

how do exploiters control their victims?

Victims are controlled through various means, such as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Exploiters may manipulate cultural, familial, or religious pressures, confiscate documents, control finances, or monitor movement. Even if escape seems possible, the risks and barriers can make leaving extremely difficult.

Here are some common methods of control that exploiters use to manipulate and control others:

- ☐ Violence
- ☐ Threats
- ☐ Debt bondage
- ☐ Coercion (a form of forced labour when a person is forced to work to pay off a debt they can't control)

Myth #3

“Victims of human trafficking are always physically trapped.”

The truth is traffickers use psychological control, threats, debt bondage, and document withholding to keep people in exploitation.

tania's story

Tania* arrived from her home in Latvia with a visa for a six month stay. She had been promised work by an “agency boss” in her home country and arrived at Victoria bus station in London where she was met by a gang member. She believed hotel accommodation had been arranged and was ushered, with other men and women, into the back of a minibus.

Tania said: “It was summer. We were driving and driving, and I thought the hotel must be quite far away. It became dark and I did not know where I was. I spoke no English. We stopped in a village. A man took my passport and papers.

“We went into a house. The rooms were dark, there were a lot of people inside. Sleeping on the floor, everywhere. I said: ‘Who are these people?’ He punched me in the face. I was in shock. My nose was bleeding. I didn’t know that I’m not allowed to talk. If you talk you are beaten.

“He said I owed them £10,000 (for arranging her journey to the UK) and work started the next day.”

On one of her afternoons off, Tania walked into a Citizens Advice Bureau and handed over a note which read: “Please help me, I am not legal.”

The contact led to the Salvation Army who in turn referred her to our Women’s safe house.

Tania said: “I was moved to Unseen’s safe house where my case worker made me a cup of tea. I was given a room, but I could not sleep for many weeks.

“The team supported me to complete English courses, see my doctor.

“I remember a trip to a museum, I didn’t think I could go because I was illegal. My case worker knows how much I love history and told me I must go, it will be good for you and she was right. Volunteering in the museum was one of the happiest days of my life.”

Tania has volunteered at various historical sites and with the Salvation Army. She continues to receive therapeutic support which aids her recovery.

* Tania’s name has been changed to protect her identity.

Myth #4

“Individuals who have experienced modern slavery are ‘helpless victims’.”

The truth is survivors are experts, many of whom are leading the fight against modern slavery. They know what trafficking looks like. They know how policies impact real lives. They know how best to support victims.

does modern slavery connect to other crimes?

Modern slavery rarely exists in isolation. It fuels other serious offences, such as knife crime, violence against women and girls, money laundering, fraud, theft, and drug crimes. There are also links between modern slavery and other issues such as the climate crisis, as climate-induced migration is making people more vulnerable to exploitation.

what does UK law say about modern slavery?

There are different modern slavery, human trafficking, and exploitation laws which apply across the UK. One key piece of legislation was the 2015 Modern Slavery Act, which was shaped with input from Unseen’s CEO, Andrew Wallis OBE, and our Deputy CEO, Justine Carter. The Act includes provisions designed to increase pressure on those committing modern slavery offences and protecting those who might be victims.

This act included the introduction of:

- ☐ Potential life sentences for criminals and reparation orders that provided compensation to the victim directly from the criminal's assets.
- ☐ Provisions to protect victims from prosecutions if they have been forced to commit crimes as a result of their exploitation.
- ☐ A requirement for all businesses in the UK with an annual turnover of £36m or more to produce an annual statement setting out all the steps they have taken to prevent modern slavery in any part of their own business or in their supply chains.

However, the UK's response to modern slavery is being weakened by immigration legislation. A growing culture of disbelief in potential victims has made it significantly harder for victims to be identified, supported, and protected. As a result, many survivors disengage from authorities altogether, allowing traffickers to use fear and silence to maintain control and avoid detection.

Read Unseen's [Restoring belief, reducing criminality](#) for more information.

is there anything you can do about it?

Myth #5

"There's nothing I can do about modern slavery."

The truth is there is so much you can do to stop modern slavery. You can:

- Learn the signs of exploitation and report concerns.
- Raise your voice and raise awareness.
- Be a conscious consumer.
- Support the anti-slavery movement.



Thank you for joining us in fighting to create a world without slavery. Your support means we can continue combating this crime.

To find out more ways you can get involved, check out the [support us](#) section of our website. You can also [donate](#) to Unseen and follow us on social media to help raise awareness.

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