

Assessment of evidence

Annex to Policy Brief: Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on modern slavery

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Methodology

This rapid assessment of evidence was based on academic literature, including the findings from eight published research projects funded by the Modern Slavery PEC through an open call for research into Covid-19 and modern slavery. The assessment also drew on reports and other material produced by NGOs, governments, international organisations and the media. The evidence was gathered through a thorough search for relevant materials using multiple databases, tailored to the review questions. However, it should not be regarded as a systematic review of all available evidence. In total 81 items were reviewed, though not all were referenced in this paper. Table 1 sets out characteristics of the evidence items reviewed. Around a quarter of items were published within the first few months of the global pandemic, and nearly half have been published since the beginning of 2021. We rated the evidence quality for each theme in this Brief according to the system in Box 1. The Modern Slavery PEC consulted with survivor leaders (see definitions), policymakers, representatives of the business community and academic researchers on the scope of the Brief. This is an emerging field of inquiry and the pandemic has presented significant challenges for conducting modern slavery research (Box 2).

Box 1: Evidence quality assessment – description of ratings

Green There is a well-established body of evidence on this issue; the overall landscape and evidence gaps are well understood; evidence is grounded in rigorous and peer reviewed research

Amber There are some rigorous and peer reviewed research studies on this issue; evidence base is growing but there remain gaps in understanding

Red There are no or very few rigorous research studies on this issue; evidence base is anecdotal; data sources are very limited

Table 1: Characteristics of sources reviewed

Number of items reviewed (total = 81)		Date published	
Journal articles / book chapters	31	Before 30th June 2020	21
Reports	36	30th June – 31st December 2020	13
Blogposts / webpages / media articles	14	From 1st January 2021	38
		Uncertain / unknown	9

Box 2: Challenges of conducting research during the pandemic

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) has [invested over £554m](#) across more than 3,600 Covid-19 research initiatives in the UK and globally, not including existing research initiatives that were repurposed to focus on Covid-19. The Modern Slavery PEC itself funded 11 research projects on Covid-19 and modern slavery through the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

[A survey](#) of UK researchers in October 2020 found a significant decrease in research activities that required travel away from home (e.g. laboratory work, archival research or in-person fieldwork) as well as networking, dissemination and collaboration activities. Some of the literature reviewed for this Brief reported challenges including the need to transition to remote interview and survey methodologies, the need to establish appropriate health and safety measures, and the need to rapidly identify and establish working relationships with local partners who were able to support with in-person work.^{1,2,3} Researchers have also experienced difficult changes to working patterns. Early career researchers were disproportionately affected.

Definitions: Modern slavery is understood as an umbrella term that encompasses a range of different exploitative offences and practices, including those captured by the UK's Modern Slavery Act 2015, and recognises that modern slavery results from multiple and overlapping underlying drivers, such as poverty and inequality.¹ The Policy Brief uses the term 'victim' to refer to anyone currently experiencing exploitation and those engaged in criminal justice processes,² 'survivor' to refer to anyone who has exited any form of modern slavery, 'survivor leader' to refer to anyone who has exited any form of modern slavery and is actively contributing to anti-slavery or social justice efforts at any level and 'people with lived experience' as umbrella term that includes all of these people.

The Covid-19 pandemic: At the time of writing, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (formally declared in March 2020⁴) had resulted in over 205 million confirmed cases of Covid-19 and over 4.3 million deaths.⁵ Governments continue to take a wide range of policy and economic measures to respond to the pandemic, and public health responses have varied in stringency over time and between countries.⁶ Globally, countries have begun rolling out Covid-19 vaccines, with progress faster in developed countries. In the 18 months since the pandemic was declared, there have been several phases of national and regional lockdowns in the UK including legal restrictions on social contact and school closures,⁷ with most Covid-19 legal restrictions lifted on 19 July 2021. The impact of lifting restrictions and vaccine rollout across the UK on the level of Covid-19 infections remains uncertain, and Government scientists continue to model a range of scenarios.⁸

1. Please see [here](#) for further detail on how the Modern Slavery PEC understands and defines modern slavery and see the [Modern Slavery PEC Policy Brief on Modern Slavery and International Development](#) for more detail on the concept of modern slavery as a systemic issue and the evidence on common drivers of modern slavery.

2. The term 'potential victim' is used when referencing the UK's National Referral Mechanism (NRM), in line with the terminology used by this system.

1. Scale and nature: how has the way that modern slavery manifests changed during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Evidence quality rating on this theme: **Amber**

Scale of modern slavery

Although no research has quantified the changes to prevalence of modern slavery during the pandemic, there is strong consensus across multiple evidence sources that the pandemic has increased vulnerability to modern slavery all over the world. ^{2,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16} It is widely acknowledged that accurately measuring the prevalence of modern slavery is challenging.¹⁷

Many of the underlying drivers of modern slavery have worsened during the pandemic, meaning we can reasonably infer the risk of modern slavery has increased. Many of the drivers illustrated below intersect and interact to provide a combined effect:

- **Unemployment:** ILO-modelled estimates show that in 2020, total employment globally fell by 114 million, relative to 2019, as a result of workers being unemployed or dropping out of the workforce.¹⁸ In the UK, the unemployment rate increased at the start of the pandemic and remains higher than early 2020.¹⁹
- **Poverty:** World Bank estimates suggest the pandemic is likely to push 88million–115million people into extreme poverty in 2020, setting back poverty reduction by around three years.²⁰ ILO-modelled estimates show that relative to 2019, an estimated 108 million workers are now extremely or moderately poor and that working poverty rates have reverted to those of 2015.¹⁸
- **Gender:** a report by UN Women estimated that 47 million women and children would be pushed into poverty by Covid-19.²¹
- **Gender-based violence:** a UN Women report in 2020 (based on media reports) found that calls to domestic abuse helplines had increased across multiple countries since lockdowns started.²² Other research has found that gender-based violence tends to increase in situations of crisis such as pandemics.^{23,24}
- **Health inequality:** Covid-19 disproportionately affects disadvantaged communities; for example in England and Wales, black and minority ethnic Covid-19 patients accounted for 34.5% of the critically ill with Covid-19 but only 14% of the population (in the period to April 16, 2020).²⁵
- **Informality:** the ILO estimates 2 billion workers (60% of globally employed) were working informally in 2019, and that they were three times more likely than their formal counterparts to lose their jobs as a result of the pandemic and less likely to be able to access social protections.¹⁸

Changes to other underlying drivers may have reduced the risk of modern slavery occurring, but data on these are more limited. For example, border closures and reduced demand for non-essential goods may have reduced the likelihood of trafficking across borders and exploitation (although border closures may increase risks for those experiencing exploitation within countries). In the UK context, in October 2020, the Joint Slavery and Trafficking Analysis Centre (JSTAC), an intelligence assessment organisation, concluded that “it remains likely that the threat of modern slavery to the UK remains below that in the period before the outbreak of Covid-19 and it is highly likely that continued restrictions on international travel will have led to an increased reliance on the existing victim pool in the UK”.²⁶

Nature of modern slavery

There is strong consensus across multiple evidence sources that certain already-vulnerable population groups have been more vulnerable to all forms of exploitation during the pandemic. In particular:

- **Migrant workers:** lockdowns and restrictions on international travel meant migrants were often stranded, meaning many became unemployed, struggled to access basic services and were more vulnerable to exploitation.¹⁰
- **Informal workers:** the pandemic has disproportionately affected those in informal employment who often receive less government support than those working in the formal economy.²⁷
- **Ethnic minority groups:** these groups were more at risk of contracting Covid-19²⁵ and one study of workers in the garment industry found ethnic minority groups were more likely than other workers to report experiencing forced labour indicators.²⁸
- **People in a current situation of exploitation:** there were multiple reports of challenges in identifying this group and enabling their access to support services.²
- **Survivors of modern slavery:** lockdown and increased isolation exacerbated existing challenges for survivors (see Box 3).
- **Children:** affected by school closures with reports of increased child labour and online child sexual exploitation and abuse.²
- **Women and girls:** disproportionately affected by increased violence and loss of employment.^{2,18}

The majority of primary research on modern slavery undertaken during the pandemic has evidenced increased vulnerability to forced labour in supply chains in countries outside of the UK, with much more limited research on other forms of modern slavery. None of the evidence we reviewed suggests that completely new forms of modern slavery have emerged during the pandemic.

Forced labour: Several research studies collected survey and interview data from workers, mostly in low and middle income countries, about their experiences during the pandemic, and some studies specifically focused on the International Labour Organisation's forced labour indicators.^{1,28,29,30,31,32,33} This research offers a 'bottom up' worker-informed perspective on how the scale of forced labour may have changed during the pandemic. Common themes include: reports of deteriorating working conditions; reduced work and income loss; greater debt; higher frequency of many forced labour indicators directly linked to the pandemic, especially lockdown situations (e.g. isolation and restriction on movement).

Modern Slavery PEC-funded research surveyed 1,491 workers in medical gloves factories in Malaysia between August and October 2020, finding that four of the ILO's 11 forced labour indicators worsened during the pandemic: restriction on movement; isolation; abusive working and living conditions and excessive overtime.²⁹ Six forced labour indicators remained constant (including abuse of vulnerability and retention of identity documents) and one – debt bondage – improved, with reports of increased repayment of recruitment fees to workers [thought to be linked to the impact of US forced labour import bans targeted at this sector](#).

Global Fund to End Modern Slavery research surveyed c.10,400 migrant construction workers in India between June and August 2020, finding evidence of increased unemployment and debt, both risk factors for modern slavery. There was a 65% decrease in the number of respondents employed in the construction sector compared to pre-pandemic. Following lockdown, the proportion of respondents in debt increased by 6%.³³

Modern Slavery PEC-funded research surveyed 439 Bulgarian and Romanian migrants in the UK between January and March 2021, who were primarily working in the agriculture and food industries. 67% reported they were negatively affected by the pandemic, issues included reduced working hours, struggling to cover basic living costs and enforced overtime – potentially making workers vulnerable to exploitation.³²

Modern Slavery PEC-funded research surveyed 1,140 workers in garment production in Ethiopia, Honduras, India and Myanmar between November 2020 and February 2021. For those who had changed jobs during the pandemic, over a third reported worse working conditions in their new job, such as lower pay, less job security and more dangerous workplaces. For current workers, there were reports of indicators of forced labour: 22% reported unfair wage deductions, 34% reported threats and/or intimidation and average monthly income loss of 11% compared to pre-pandemic.²⁸

Evidence shows that there were increased risks of forced labour in supply chains within both sectors that had experienced demand spikes, such as PPE,²⁹ and sectors where demand had fallen due to closure of non-essential businesses during lockdowns.²⁸ There is consensus across research and economic metrics that the following sectors have been most affected by the pandemic both in the UK and globally, in terms of lost output, job losses, and supply chain disruption, suggesting heightened risk of exploitation:^{18,34,35}

- Wholesale and retail trade
- Construction and manufacturing, including ready-made garment production
- Accommodation and food services

Trafficking for sexual exploitation: There has been limited research on pandemic-specific risks for trafficking for sexual exploitation, but some studies have assessed increased risk to sex workers as a result of the pandemic.^{13,36,37,38} Not all sex work will constitute trafficking or slavery, but the broader risks identified may be relevant. Issues identified include increased risk of transmission of Covid-19 due to the close contact nature of work and the inability of sex workers to access social protections introduced in the UK (such as income support), potentially leading to engagement in riskier behaviours in order to maintain income. Some reports suggested some sex workers stopped providing in-person services during the peak of the pandemic and moved to online services, but other reports suggest many continued to work in person.³⁹

Child criminal exploitation: In qualitative research with frontline practitioners to examine the impact of Covid-19 on county lines in England (where children are forced into drug trafficking), respondents reported that overall the level of county lines criminal activity was mostly unchanged during the pandemic.⁴⁰ Data from the UK's NRM shows an increase in referrals for children exploited through county lines in 2020 compared to 2019.⁴¹

Child sexual exploitation and abuse: Reporting from law enforcement^{42,43} suggests that online child sexual exploitation and abuse increased during the pandemic, linked to perpetrators and children spending more time online, due to stay-at-home orders and school closures. Not all online child sexual exploitation and abuse will constitute trafficking or modern slavery.

Domestic servitude: Very little research has been conducted into the changing scale of domestic servitude. A small number of studies show that existing female domestic workers reported increased violence from employers during the pandemic.⁹ Survivors of modern slavery reported increased risk of experiencing domestic abuse during the pandemic (Box 3).

Some evidence suggests that traffickers adapted their methods during the pandemic and increased online recruitment and exploitation was a common theme.¹¹ However this evidence was often based on qualitative reports from law enforcement and NGO practitioners, so it is difficult to assess whether these changes are widespread or representative. Reports focused on online tactics linked to trafficking for sexual exploitation and false job advertisements. Other reports on changes to traffickers' methods include use of increased violence against victims confined to private spaces,² and increased use of risky smuggling and trafficking routes following border closures.⁴⁴ One UK study identified examples of county lines offenders shifting tactics during the pandemic for example targeting different groups of children, such as more females and children from affluent backgrounds, and using private hire vehicles rather than public transport to move drugs.⁴²

Research that has gathered data from multiple countries shows that vulnerability to modern slavery increased in almost all countries in line with the pandemic's global reach, but that vulnerability increased by a greater amount in low and middle income countries.^{10,18,45}

This review identified several studies focused on specific geographical contexts. For example:

- In Africa, research found increased risk of child exploitation in Senegal and Kenya⁴⁶ as the impacts of Covid-19 led to increased economic pressure for families, higher levels of poverty and loss of housing, in turn increasing risk of children being exploited. In Sudan,⁴⁷ research found increased vulnerability to human trafficking due to factors such as mobility restrictions affecting income generation, particularly in the informal sector. Other studies identified increased risks of forced labour in garment production in Ethiopia due to job losses and deteriorating working conditions.^{28,30}
- In Asia, evidence has shown increased risk of forced labour risks within garment production in India, Bangladesh and Myanmar due to worsening working conditions and higher debt,^{28,48} and female global assembly line workers in Sri Lanka³ and other forms of human trafficking in India.^{1,33} Multiple studies have found evidence of increased vulnerability to trafficking among migrant workers across a range of settings. For example, research into experiences of displaced Syrian agriculture workers in the Middle East found that the economic pressure of the pandemic, combined with longstanding structural marginalisation, informal work, ill-health and lack of education have made workers' livelihoods more precarious during the pandemic and increased risk of exploitative work.⁴⁹ Other research found increased risk of trafficking and forced labour among migrant workers in Malaysia's medical gloves industry;²⁹ migrant workers in the care, construction and agriculture sectors in Israel;⁵⁰ and Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Gulf region.⁵¹

Scale and Nature in the UK

In the UK, in 2020, 10,613 potential victims of modern slavery were identified and referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM),⁴¹ almost exactly the same as 2019 (10,616), ending a pattern of year-on-year growth. The largest decline in referrals occurred during the first national lockdown (March–June 2020), largely due to a drop in adult referrals from UK Visas and Immigration and Immigration Enforcement, linked to reduced international travel. However, there were marked increases in number of referrals for ‘county lines’ exploitation, mostly involving UK national children. NRM referrals for these cases had already been increasing prior to the pandemic, and it is not clear whether this trend would have continued in the absence of a pandemic. During the first half of 2021, Q1 (Jan–Mar) had similar level of referrals to Q1 2020, but there was a large increase into Q2 (Apr–Jun) likely due to increased travel into UK as the third national lockdown restrictions eased.

2. Government and business responses to the pandemic: what are the implications for modern slavery?

Evidence quality rating for this theme: **Amber**

Based on available evidence it is not possible to make a full assessment of the overall net effect of Governments’ and businesses’ pandemic response measures on modern slavery efforts. Evidence suggests that Government-mandated lockdowns have had the most significant negative impacts on modern slavery. Many Governments mandated lockdowns during the early stages of the pandemic to control the spread of the virus and protect health services. The negative impacts were both direct, as lockdowns trapped people in exploitative situations and made it more difficult to identify and support those who had been exploited, and indirect as the wider economic impacts of loss of income and employment increased vulnerability. **Many states (particularly developed countries) and businesses**

have maintained a focus on anti-slavery actions, which will have mitigated risks.

The findings below are presented according to four different modern slavery policy objectives (identification and support; supply chains; prevention and legal enforcement), and we distinguish between the situation in the UK and globally.

Box 3: Perspective of people with lived experience on the impact of Covid-19 on modern slavery

Involving people with lived experience of modern slavery in research is a guiding principle for the Modern Slavery PEC. A number of studies we reviewed involved adults with lived experience as participants in research into the impacts of the pandemic across a range of countries.^{12,52,53,54} We also received input from UK-based survivor leaders to this Policy Brief, including Survivor Alliance, an organisation dedicated to unite and empower survivors of slavery and human trafficking.⁵⁵

Common themes identified include:

- Lockdowns and associated isolation from friends and family increased anxiety and mental health issues, triggering memories of exploitative situations. Lockdowns led to long periods of time alone to reflect on past experiences, which contributed to feelings of hopelessness. Lockdown also meant that individuals were not able to employ their usual coping strategies and were at risk of developing negative coping strategies, such as substance abuse.
- Issues with survivors' accommodation circumstances may have been exacerbated during lockdown, for example, some survivors were at increased risk of domestic abuse.
- More time spent inside accommodation with poor hygiene or maintenance issues was felt to exacerbate mental health issues, or more time spent inside shared accommodation with sometimes challenging social dynamics.
- For many non-British nationals in the UK, lockdown was felt to exacerbate the sense of 'limbo' many people with lived experience already experience when waiting for the outcome of NRM and immigration decisions. This situation was described by survivors as "immigration lockdown".
- Loss of income and jobs, and reduced employment opportunities as a result of the economic effects of the pandemic and concerns this could increase vulnerability.
- Increased difficulties in accessing services for assistance with psychological recovery such as counselling and legal assistance, and lengthening delays in receiving NRM and asylum decisions and court prosecutions in the UK, contributing to the feeling of limbo.
- People with lived experience in the UK reported they have no access to financial support beyond normal subsistence paid as part of the NRM support package, but experienced higher living costs, such as food and hygiene items. There were concerns this could make individuals more vulnerable to exploitation.

Survivor Alliance reported that most survivors in the UK want to see "immigration lockdown" being lifted as the pandemic lockdown is easing, so they could be able to get back their lives and rebuild their journey to freedom and being able to secure a job.

Identification and support for people affected by modern slavery

Evidence of impact of Government and business pandemic responses

- **Globally, the pandemic has limited opportunities to identify people currently in a situation of exploitation.**^{2,9,11} Staff in frontline services who typically may identify victims were reduced through re-deployment of resources and sickness absence, and increasingly working remotely, as well as individuals in exploitation situations being more isolated, particularly during stay-at-home lockdowns. Research suggests the importance of training health workers on spotting the signs of modern slavery.¹³
- **There has been reduced access to slavery and trafficking support services during the pandemic, particularly in low and middle income countries.**^{9,10,11} NGOs running services reported reduced resourcing and capacity, combined with increased costs (such as for PPE and supplying basic provisions e.g. food). In a survey in April-May 2020 of stakeholders from 102 countries, half of the countries surveyed had only a partially operational NRM or equivalent system.¹²
- **Border closures and restrictions on international travel reduced opportunities for survivors to be repatriated to their home countries.**²
- **In the UK context, the pandemic, particularly lockdowns, has had a more detrimental impact on identification rather than on support for modern slavery survivors.** The NRM remained fully operational to provide support services, under the UK's international legal obligations, and UK governments provided additional funding to support pandemic-related adaptations to support provision.²⁶ However, survivors reported struggles in accessing some services outside of the NRM (Box 3). On identification, Covid-related changes to working practices reduced opportunities for NRM First Responders to identify potential victims during lockdowns.⁵⁶ The UK's Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline reported a 14% decrease in calls in 2020 compared to 2019.⁵⁷ Practitioners had particular concerns about the impact of reduced face-to-face service provision and school closures on identifying children at risk of exploitation.^{40,58}
- **In the UK, the pandemic and lockdowns appear to have contributed to longer timescales for NRM decisions which survivors report will have detrimental impacts on their wellbeing (Box 3).** While average decision-making timescales data are subject to fluctuation, it is notable that for NRM decisions made in Q2 2021 (Apr-Jun), the average (median) time from referral to conclusive grounds decision was 435 days while in Q1 2020 (Jan-Mar), before the pandemic began, the median was 302 days from referral to conclusive grounds.⁵⁹

Promising practice in addressing identification and support for people affected by modern slavery during the pandemic

- Support service provision continued **through virtual platforms, technology and data packages** across many countries, including the UK, though some survivors struggled to access online provision, especially in low income or rural regions.^{2,10} Emerging evidence suggests those receiving support services in England reported that greater technology access was positive for their wellbeing,⁶⁰ but there has been more limited research on the effectiveness of remote support.
- NGOs delivering services reported that **donor flexibility** aided their ability to adapt support services for example to purchase PPE and emergency food packages.^{9,10}
- Across many countries, modern slavery support services adapted to address **Covid-19 related health needs** of service users, for example through provision of testing, PPE and facilities for self-isolation.⁹
- From April-August 2020, the UK Government introduced a policy that individuals would not be required to move out of Government-funded modern slavery victim care contract accommodation for at least three months.²⁶

Addressing modern slavery in supply chains

Evidence of impact of Government and business pandemic responses

- **The pandemic led to unprecedented and rapidly changing supply chain dynamics across the globe with modern slavery risk implications for businesses and public procurement organisations including Governments buying goods and services.**^{61,62} This included but was not limited to: demand spikes for certain products; reduced demand for non-essential products; a requirement to rapidly take on new suppliers; threats to health and safety in the workplace; internal business resource diverted to business-critical activities and away from Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) issues; and disruption to supply inputs.
- **Measures taken in response to Covid-19 both meant that workers in the lower tiers of supply chains were more vulnerable (e.g. due to local lockdowns, business closures, job losses, wage reductions and risk of infection) and that buyers, brands and retailers could not undertake standard due diligence activities such as on-site audits.** Buying organisations were faced with a need to overcome these due diligence challenges while themselves facing reduced resources and competing priorities, leading to delays in or reductions to risk mitigation activity. Evidence suggests businesses were broadly aware of the increased risks presented by Covid.⁶³ A survey of nearly 500 procurement managers in the UK found that 32% respondents reported that the priority attached to modern slavery increased during the pandemic, but 16% reported the priority decreased. 82% of those who had taken on new suppliers during the pandemic had undertaken expedited modern slavery due diligence.⁶⁴ Similar challenges were faced by public procurement, for example expedited due diligence was also identified for the supply of medical gloves to the UK's NHS, a sector with indicators of forced labour.²⁹
- **In some sectors, evidence shows that actions taken by businesses, usually brands and retailers at the top of the supply chain, contributed to the increased risk of forced labour further down supply chains.** Research on the garment and fashion sector found that where brands/retailers cancelled orders and refused to pay for orders, this led to mass worker layoffs, worse pay and worse conditions.²⁸

Promising practice in addressing modern slavery in supply chains during the pandemic

- Research found that businesses prioritised improving their **supply chain visibility and supplier management** as a result of pandemic-related disruption. While the primary purpose of such efforts was to maintain supply chain resilience, there are opportunities to apply these tools and levers to mitigate modern slavery risk.⁶⁴
- In the garment industry, risks for workers in the supply chain were reduced when businesses took action such as: provision of cash support for workers; advance payments for suppliers, level-loading and flexibility with delivery times; dialogue and open communications with suppliers; ensuring suppliers paid full wages and severance owed to workers; and implementing worker helplines and grievance systems with robust remediation.²⁸

Prevention of modern slavery

Evidence of impact of government and business pandemic responses

- **Globally, the pandemic has limited modern slavery prevention activity:**
 - There were reports that some governments **suspended modern slavery awareness-raising campaigns** during the pandemic as resources and focus were shifted to other priorities.²
 - The pandemic **limited the audit, inspection and regulatory oversight of workplaces by businesses and governments**, which can identify those vulnerable to exploitation. In the UK the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority moved to largely remote working and reduced face-to-face workplace inspections. A survey of UK-based procurement managers showed that businesses reduced factory audits due to health and safety concerns, though some moved to conducting audits online.⁶⁴
 - Due to the economic implications of the pandemic, **government resources were re-prioritised to address the pandemic**. In the UK, the Government reduced the level of spending on overseas development assistance (ODA) from 0.7% to 0.5% GNI as a direct result of the economic impact of the pandemic.⁶⁵ This has led to reduced funding for international development programmes overseas, including programmes aimed at preventing modern slavery and reduced UK funding for international research.
- Governments introduced broader temporary policies to mitigate unemployment and provide social support (see promising practice) however these measures require significant Government investment and were **not always available in low income countries**. In addition, particularly vulnerable groups such as informal workers and those with no immigration status were often unable to access these measures.¹⁰
- **Border closures and restrictions on international travel increased vulnerability of specific groups**. For example, research found that border closures increased the number of seafarer crew trapped on board global vessels with no choice but to extend contracts, which in turn increased vulnerability to forced labour.⁶⁶

Promising practice in addressing prevention of modern slavery during the pandemic

- Government policies to mitigate wider vulnerabilities such as unemployment and homelessness can in turn reduce risk of exploitation through modern slavery. Examples include furlough and wage subsidy schemes; increased welfare support payments; cash transfers; provision of emergency accommodation for homeless people and maintaining schools open for vulnerable children.^{10,11}
- The pandemic resulted in greater online collaboration between stakeholders working to address modern slavery including online training, awareness-raising and gathering evidence for research purposes.^{2,9,40}
- Some countries extended temporary visas for migrants, suspended fines for visa overstayers and extended medical coverage to undocumented migrants, measures which have the potential to reduce vulnerability.²

Legal enforcement (i.e. investigation and prosecution of crimes)

Evidence of impact of Government and business pandemic responses

- **Across multiple countries, the pandemic resulted in disruptions to the investigation and prosecution of modern slavery cases.** This resulted from reduced staff capacity in law enforcement and prosecution agencies due to re-deployment of resources and sickness absences.^{2,10,11}
- **The pandemic also led to significant delays in accessing justice.** The length of the criminal justice process from investigation to prosecution has increased, as courts were either closed or have needed to adapt to accommodate social distancing requirements.^{9,10} In England and Wales, in Q1 2021, outstanding case numbers for all prosecutions at the Crown Court were higher year-on-year by 45% - a total of nearly 60,000 at the Crown Court. The average time from offence to completion at Crown Court level also increased, by 23% (from 96 to 118 days).⁶⁷ Evidence suggests existing challenges around engaging victims of modern slavery in investigations and prosecutions, and the disruption and delay brought about by the pandemic is likely to exacerbate these issues.

Promising practice in addressing legal enforcement of modern slavery during the pandemic

- The pandemic led to greater use of **remote and technology-enabled justice mechanisms** across many countries such as remote trials involving video witness testimony and moving more paperwork online. This was felt to be beneficial for enabling individuals to participate in the criminal justice process.⁹
- In the UK, Project AIDANT Covid-19 was a period of **intensified law enforcement activity which involved over 450 proactive visits** to food processing, food packaging and agriculture sector premises due to concerns about increased risk in these sectors, and resulted in investigations and arrests.²⁶

3. Outlook: What is the longevity of the changes in modern slavery (and response to it) observed during the pandemic?

Evidence quality rating on this theme: **Red**

None of the evidence we reviewed had specifically considered the longevity of the impact of the pandemic on modern slavery. Therefore, our assessment is based on evidence about how the pandemic has impacted modern slavery to date and forecasts for changes to underlying drivers of modern slavery.

If states introduce lockdowns in future, to address pandemics or other crises, it is strongly likely this will likely have a severe negative impact on both vulnerability and response to modern slavery.

- Earlier evidence demonstrated that lockdowns, which are important public health measures, are the aspect of the Covid-19 response that have particularly harmful effects on modern slavery. Decisions on whether to impose lockdowns in Covid-19 or other crisis situations are informed by multiple factors, such as pressure on health services, the arrival of vaccine-resistant new variants and the ability of states to afford lockdowns.

It is likely that the economic impact of the pandemic will mean the increased vulnerability to modern slavery observed during the pandemic will persist in the short to medium term, especially in low and middle income countries.

- From the second half of 2021, economic forecasts suggest economic recovery will be faster in high-income countries, linked to the pace of states' Covid-19 vaccine rollout programmes and their ability to borrow for large-scale fiscal spending.⁶⁸ The ILO forecasts a sustained and pronounced increase in unemployment in countries at all income levels, and a pandemic-induced shortfall in global jobs (projected as 75 million in 2021 and 23 million in 2022), and that this will be most severe in low-income countries where newly created jobs are expected to be of low productivity and poor quality.¹⁸
- This suggests that the trends observed around increased risk of modern slavery, especially in low to middle income countries, are likely to persist in the short to medium term (i.e. next 1-3 years).
- In the UK, the level of GDP is 8.8% below where it was pre-pandemic,⁶⁹ however forecasts suggest 7.1% GDP growth in 2021 and 5.4% GDP growth in 2022, and an unemployment rate of 5.4% in 2021.⁷⁰ At the time of writing, many of the UK Government's pandemic-related social protection measures (such as the income support scheme and uplift in Universal Credit payments) were due to stop in autumn 2021 and this may lead to increased vulnerability for those facing income or job losses.
- It is likely that Government spending will continue to be prioritised on addressing pandemic recovery efforts, and this could lead to reduced spend on addressing modern slavery. For example, the UK Government has committed to reinstate its target of spending 0.7% of Gross National Income on Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) when certain fiscal conditions are met.⁷¹ However, based on recent economic forecasts, ODA spending is unlikely to return to 0.7% of GNI until at least 2024.⁷² Given that vulnerability to modern slavery has increased in countries where UK ODA spend will be reduced, it is important to prioritise other levers to advance UK foreign policy and international development objectives to address modern slavery.

It is likely that as international travel increases, trafficking of people across borders including to the UK will also increase, though it has not been possible to assess how changes to the UK's immigration system introduced during the pandemic will influence this.

- NRM statistics show that there have been increases in potential victims identified and referred during the periods of 2020 and 2021 where more international travel to the UK was possible.⁴¹
- However, in 2021, following EU Exit, the UK introduced a new points-based immigration system with very limited visa routes available for low-skilled work,⁷³ and these sectors are linked to increased vulnerability to modern slavery. Further evidence is needed on how these changes may influence trafficking flows.

Some evidence suggests the pandemic may lead to longer-term changes to supply chain dynamics. Their impact on forced labour risks in supply chains will be mixed.

- Some experts suggest the suppressed consumer demand for certain non-essential goods (such as fashion) could continue in future, linked to wider concerns around the impact of consumer behaviour on increased carbon emissions and climate change, which would mean not all businesses will return to pre-pandemic operation and employment levels.⁶²
- Research on the Malaysian medical gloves sector found that the pandemic resulted in power shifting from buyers to manufacturers when products were in high demand.²⁹ Reduced demand over the medium to long term may shift more power to buyers which presents opportunities for addressing modern slavery risk.
- Evidence from a survey of procurement managers in the UK found that the pandemic led to increased supply chain visibility and if this trend continues, there are opportunities for businesses and public procurement organisations to capitalise on this to build in modern slavery risk management.⁶⁴
- There has been some discussion of the possibility of the 'localisation' of supply chains (i.e. making them shorter and more visible) over the longer-term in response to the perceived vulnerability of long and complex supply chains that the pandemic has highlighted.⁷⁴

Recommendations for UK-based businesses and policymakers, and suggestions of areas for further research, are included in the [Policy Brief](#) and in a dedicated [Briefing for UK Business Leaders](#), which can be found at <https://modernslaverypec.org/resources/covid-modern-slavery>.

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