

Policy brief:

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on modern slavery



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Modern Slavery PEC Policy Brief 2021-4

Overview

This Policy Brief by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery PEC) draws on a rapid assessment of relevant evidence to set out the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for modern slavery, and lessons that can be learned for future crisis situations. The Brief addressed three key questions and rated the quality of evidence on each as Green, Amber or Red. Findings and recommendations have been tailored for UK-based policymakers and businesses, given the Modern Slavery PEC's current focus on these groups.

Green: Evidence base is robust and well-established

Amber: There is some robust evidence but there remain gaps in understanding

Red: There is very little robust evidence

Key Findings

Scale and nature: how has modern slavery changed during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Amber

- Evidence shows that the pandemic has increased vulnerability to modern slavery all over the world, including in the UK, as many of the underlying drivers of modern slavery have worsened, such as poverty, inequality and unemployment.
- Evidence suggests certain population groups, sectors and geographies have become more vulnerable to modern slavery during the pandemic. For example, vulnerability has increased to a greater degree in low- and middle-income countries, and for already vulnerable groups such as children, migrant and informal workers, and women and girls.
- Most research has focused on the heightened vulnerability to forced labour in supply chains for workers in low- and middle-income countries, with more limited research into how the pandemic has affected other forms, such as trafficking for sexual exploitation.
- Some evidence suggests that traffickers adapted their methods during the pandemic; increased online recruitment and exploitation was a common theme.

- In the UK, identification of potential victims of modern slavery appeared to be affected by the pandemic, with declining numbers of adults identified, linked to reduced international travel, but marked increases in the number of 'county lines' referrals, mostly involving UK national children.

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

Amber

- Government-mandated lockdowns, which were important protective public health measures, had the most significant direct and indirect negative impacts for modern slavery.
- The pandemic response limited opportunities to identify and support people affected by modern slavery across the world. Investigation and prosecution of modern slavery was disrupted. The pandemic reduced direct modern slavery prevention efforts, and Government resources were re-prioritised to focus on addressing the pandemic.
- Business measures taken in response to Covid-19 meant that workers in lower tiers of supply chains were more vulnerable to forced labour and that brands and retailers could not undertake standard due diligence activities.
- Despite these challenges, there are multiple examples of promising practice in addressing modern slavery during the pandemic, such as businesses improving supply chain visibility and ongoing provision of Government and NGO support to survivors through remote methods.

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

Red

- The economic impact of the pandemic will likely mean that the increased vulnerability to modern slavery observed during the pandemic will persist in the short to medium term (i.e. at least the next 1-3 years), especially in low- and middle-income countries, which is likely to affect workers in supply chains for goods to the UK. The re-prioritisation of government spending to address pandemic recovery risks may further reduce resourcing to address modern slavery.

Perspectives of people with lived experience of modern slavery

A key concern raised was that lockdowns and the associated isolation from friends and family increased anxiety and mental health issues, and exacerbated the sense of 'limbo' many people with lived experience already experience when waiting for the outcome of National Referral Mechanism and immigration decisions.

Key recommendations

The Brief makes ten recommendations to UK-based policymakers and businesses, which can be found on [page 10](#).

Methodology

This Policy Brief is based on a rapid review of evidence, which is set out in the accompanying [Annex](#). The evidence review drew on the findings from eight published research projects funded by the Modern Slavery PEC, as well as reports and other material produced by NGOs, governments, international organisations and the media. A total of 81 publications were reviewed. The evidence was gathered through a thorough search for relevant materials using multiple databases, tailored to three review questions set out below. However, it should not be regarded as a systematic review of all available evidence. 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.

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

Definitions

The Policy Brief understands modern slavery as an umbrella term that encompasses a range of different exploitative offences and practices, including those captured by the UK's legislation on modern slavery,¹ and recognises that modern slavery results from multiple and overlapping underlying drivers, such as poverty and inequality.² The Policy Brief uses the term 'victim' to refer to anyone currently experiencing exploitation and those engaged in criminal justice processes,³ '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' to refer to all these groups of people.

1. Modern slavery offences are defined in the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which covers England and Wales, the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act (Scotland) 2015 and the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.

2. 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.

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

Findings

All supporting evidence is referenced in the separate Annex document.

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**

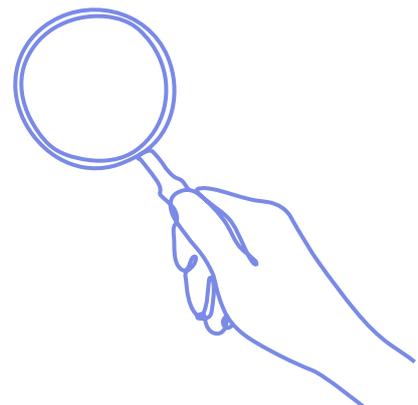
Scale of modern slavery

Evidence shows that the pandemic has increased vulnerability to modern slavery all over the world, as many of the underlying drivers of modern slavery have worsened across many countries (including the UK) during the pandemic, such as poverty, inequality and unemployment. Changes to other underlying drivers may have temporarily reduced risk of modern slavery (for example, border closures), however data on these are more limited. Our review did not find any research which had attempted to quantify the changing prevalence of modern slavery, however accurately measuring prevalence is widely acknowledged as challenging.

Evidence suggests certain population groups, sectors and geographies have become more vulnerable to modern slavery during the pandemic:

- Population groups: already vulnerable groups across the world and within the UK have become more at risk of exploitation during the pandemic, in particular: migrant workers; informal workers; children; ethnic minority groups; people in a current situation of exploitation; survivors of modern slavery; and women and girls.
- Geographies: vulnerability has increased to a greater degree in low- and middle-income countries, and evidence has demonstrated increased vulnerability across a range of countries, such as India, Bangladesh, Sudan, Senegal, Kenya, Ethiopia, Malaysia and Myanmar.
- Sectors: evidence shows an increase in the risk of forced labour both in supply chains that experienced demand spikes (e.g. PPE production) and in those that experienced a significant reduction in demand. The sectors most affected by the pandemic in terms of job losses and supply chain disruption where there may be heightened risk of exploitation are wholesale and retail trade, construction and manufacturing, and accommodation and food services.

Implications of this increased vulnerability to modern slavery are discussed in part 2.



Nature of modern slavery: exploitation types

When looking at different forms of modern slavery, most research has focused on the heightened vulnerability to forced labour in supply chains in low- and middle-income countries, with more limited research into how the pandemic has affected other forms, such as trafficking for sexual exploitation. Several research studies collected survey and interview data from workers, mostly in low- and middle-income countries, about their experiences during the pandemic. This research offers a 'bottom up' worker-informed perspective on how the scale of forced labour may have changed. Common themes include: reports of deteriorating working conditions; reduced work and income loss; greater debt; and higher frequency of many forced labour indicators, such as isolation and restrictions on movement, which were directly linked to the pandemic, particularly lockdowns introduced to protect public health.

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 International Labour Organization's (ILO's) eleven forced labour indicators worsened during the pandemic: restriction on movement; isolation; abusive working and living conditions and excessive overtime. 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. (The Modern Slavery PEC recently published a [Policy Brief](#) looking in more detail at the effectiveness of import bans).

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.

Nature of modern slavery: changing methods of exploitation

Some evidence suggests that traffickers adapted their methods during the pandemic; increased online recruitment and exploitation was a common theme, and was linked to trafficking for sexual exploitation and false job advertisements. Other reports on changes to traffickers' methods include use of increased violence against victims who were confined to private spaces due to lockdowns, and increased use of risky smuggling and trafficking routes following border closures.

Changing scale and nature of modern slavery in the UK

Within the UK, in 2020, the number of potential victims of modern slavery identified and referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) remained similar to 2019, ending a pattern of year-on-year growth dating back to 2009. During 2020, there was a marked drop in adult referrals especially during the first national lockdown, but an increase in county lines referrals involving children.

Box 2: Perspective of people with lived experience on the impact of Covid-19 on modern slavery

Involving people with lived experience of modern slavery in all stages of 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. We also received input from UK-based survivor leaders to this Policy Brief, including members of Survivor Alliance, an organisation dedicated to unite and empower survivors of slavery and human trafficking.⁴

Common themes identified include:

- Lockdowns and the 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. Lockdowns 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 lockdowns, 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, as well as more time spent inside shared accommodation with sometimes challenging social dynamics.
- For many non-British nationals in the UK, lockdowns were felt to exacerbate the sense of 'limbo' many people with lived experience already experience when waiting for the outcome of NRM conclusive grounds 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 vulnerable to exploitation.

The implications of increased vulnerability to exploitation are discussed in part 2.

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.

4. Survivor Alliance provided a written submission on the themes in this Brief and participated in a workshop with PEC-funded researchers. The Modern Slavery PEC separately received feedback from a survivor leader on a draft version of this Policy Brief.

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

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

Evidence shows that Government-mandated lockdowns, which were important protective public health measures, had the most significant negative impacts for 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 of lockdowns are both direct, as lockdowns trap people in exploitative situations and make it more difficult to identify and support those who have been exploited, and indirect as the wider economic impacts of loss of income and employment increase vulnerability to exploitation.

Diagram 1 sets out the implications of both the pandemic and the response to the pandemic, and promising practice, across four different modern slavery policy objectives.

Business response: Modern Slavery PEC-funded [research](#) surveyed nearly 500 procurement managers in the UK and found that 32% of 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.

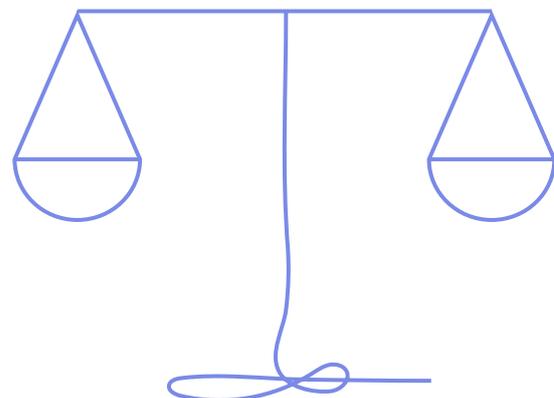


Diagram 1.



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

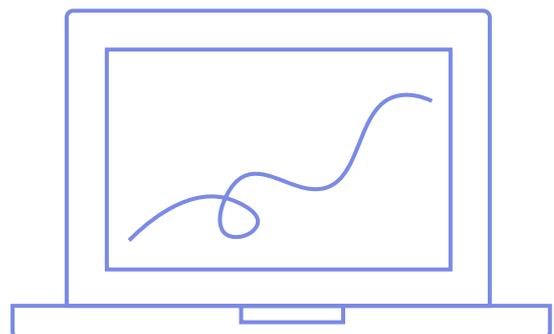
Evidence quality rating for this theme: **Red**

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 (i.e. at least the next 1-3 years), 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.

The re-prioritisation of Government spending to address pandemic recovery may reduce resourcing to address 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. However, based on recent economic forecasts, ODA spending is unlikely to return to 0.7% of GNI until at least 2024.

It is likely that as borders open and international travel increases, trafficking of people across borders, including to the UK will also increase, though it has not been possible to assess how the UK's new points-based immigration system, introduced during the pandemic, may influence trafficking to the UK, as it has restricted entry for low-skilled jobs typically associated with exploitative working conditions. Referrals to the UK's NRM increased during the periods of the last 18 months when restrictions on international travel were eased.

The pandemic may lead to longer-term changes to supply chain dynamics, with uncertain impacts on forced labour risks in supply chains. Changes include the potential for continued reduced consumer demand in certain sectors (e.g. fashion) and the potential for more 'localisation' of supply chains (i.e. making them shorter and more visible).



Recommendations

Drawing on the emerging evidence base, the recommendations below for the UK Government, devolved administrations and UK businesses reflect lessons learned from the pandemic that could be applied to future crises with similar features (such as those which result in detrimental public health and economic impacts) and are organised according to four different policy objectives.

Identification and support for people affected by modern slavery

Recommendation 1: Identification of modern slavery is much more challenging during crisis situations. During any future crises, especially during lockdowns, UK Government, devolved administrations and local statutory agencies should make concerted efforts to raise awareness of modern slavery, particularly among NRM First Responders, building on lessons learned from initiatives implemented during lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. First Responder training should emphasise the additional challenges during crisis situations. Consideration should be given to understanding the different types of places where potential victims may encounter frontline professionals during crises, e.g., supermarkets, food banks, health care settings, including Covid-19 testing centres and vaccination spaces, job centres, homelessness services. Awareness-raising should distinguish between adults and children and emphasise additional vulnerabilities of children, particularly linked to online exploitation. Previous Modern Slavery PEC [research](#) has demonstrated the value of co-designing initiatives with experienced First Responders as well as tailoring them to local contexts.

Recommendation 2: The UK Government, devolved administrations and other relevant organisations commissioning services for survivors of modern slavery should assess both the benefits and potential risks of the remote support provision introduced during the pandemic, to learn lessons for future commissioning. While greater use of technology enabled support provision to continue during lockdown situations, there has been little research into the effectiveness of this type of support for survivors, and the potential safeguarding risks. In future, hybrid working practices and remote service provision will become more mainstream practice, this may add to complexity and new challenges that we are yet to fully understand from the perspective of service users, such as on transitioning from online support back to face-to-face methods. The Modern Slavery PEC intends to conduct further research to inform this theme.

Recommendation 3: The UK Government and devolved administrations, and their contracted support providers should ensure there are robust contingency plans in place to enable the NRM to continue delivering support services in a range of different emergency scenarios.

It was positive that the UK's NRM remained operational for support delivery during the pandemic, and the UK Government and devolved administrations adapted services in a relatively reactive way to the specific challenges of the pandemic. Governments should identify a range of possible future challenging scenarios linked to further Covid lockdowns and other emergency situations (such as high impact weather events, civil unrest) and put in place pre-agreed contingencies, including how individuals in the NRM will access mainstream support provision during crises.

Recommendation 4: Businesses should collaborate with established schemes providing skills, training and routes into employment for survivors, many of whom faced additional economic hardship during the pandemic. Established schemes include Bright Future, the IOM STAR project and the Sophie Hayes Foundation.⁵ In responding to this Policy Brief, Survivor Alliance highlighted that people with lived experience in the UK want to see businesses being open to hire people who have experienced human trafficking or modern slavery, even where they have limited work experience. Businesses should therefore also consider evaluating their recruitment processes to assess whether there are any barriers that might prevent people with lived experience from applying for or successfully getting a job. Input from survivor leaders is key to ensuring that such an evaluation is as effective as possible.

Addressing modern slavery in supply chains

Recommendation 5: Businesses in scope of s54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and UK Government Ministerial departments should report on how they have responded to the modern slavery supply chain risks posed by the pandemic in their next Modern Slavery Statements, and the Home Office should strongly encourage this. Evidence shows that the pandemic has increased risk of forced labour in a wide range of supply chains globally and it is therefore important that businesses and Government departments demonstrate how they have responded. Based on available evidence, and in line with the existing areas businesses are strongly encouraged to report on their Modern Slavery Statements, we suggest businesses and UK Government Ministerial departments report on the following areas: if and how their modern slavery risk assessments have changed during the pandemic; how they protected workers in their supply chains, particularly during lockdowns; how they have conducted due diligence post-hoc for new suppliers onboarded rapidly at the start of the pandemic; and any new modern slavery policies or practices they have implemented as a direct result of the pandemic. We also recommend that the Home Office strongly encourage businesses and UK Government Ministerial departments to take these steps, for example via updates to guidance and through a prompt on the online modern slavery statement [registry](#).

Recommendation 6: Businesses should take stock of the supply chain vulnerabilities that Covid-19 has highlighted and in some cases exacerbated, and should include steps in their forward-looking due diligence to ensure that they are able to prevent or mitigate the modern slavery impacts of any similar future crisis. Evidence has demonstrated significant changes to supply chain dynamics as a result of Covid-19, alongside the impacts of Covid-19 response measures on workers vulnerable to modern slavery. Businesses had to quickly adapt their standard due diligence procedures. As businesses look ahead, beyond this pandemic, they should consider how their modern slavery strategies could be made more resilient to the impacts of potential future crises. Research has found that businesses prioritised improving their supply chain visibility and supplier management as a result of pandemic-related disruption. Businesses should consider how to continue improving supply chain visibility and resilience in future, such as by establishing closer supplier relationships.

5. For a list of similar schemes, see Garbers, K., (2021) *The benefits and the barriers to accessing employment: Consideration for survivors of modern slavery*. Available at: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2021/may/rights-lab-access-to-work-pathways-final.pdf> (Accessed: 6 September 2021).

Prevention of modern slavery

Recommendation 7: The UK Government should ensure that its current review of the Modern Slavery Strategy and revised strategic approach take account of 1) the evidence base on how the pandemic has affected the nature and scale of modern slavery, and potential future impacts; and 2) the links between modern slavery and wider legal and policy frameworks.

On 1) given reports of increasing recruitment and exploitation online, the new Modern Slavery Strategy should be carefully aligned with the wider draft Online Safety Bill proposals. The Covid-19 pandemic situation has shown that when precise quantification of the scale of modern slavery is not feasible, and in a fast-moving situation, it is important to take account of a wide range of evidence sources, including intelligence, community-based insight and qualitative research, to build a picture of what is happening. On 2), the pandemic has exposed the need to ensure that the design and delivery of wider policy and legal frameworks does not inadvertently increase risk of modern slavery (for example, some vulnerable groups such as informal and migrant workers reported struggling to access social protections). The new Modern Slavery Strategy should reflect how all Government departments will collaborate to reduce risks. The Modern Slavery PEC intends to conduct further research to address this theme.

Recommendation 8: In any future lockdowns or emergency situations, the UK Governments and devolved administrations should re-introduce the temporary social protection and economic support measures in place during the Covid-19 pandemic to mitigate vulnerability, given these measures are likely to reduce risks of exploitation. This should build on lessons learned from schemes introduced in 2020, such as furlough, increased Universal Credit, and emergency accommodation for homeless people, to improve design and coverage. Crisis-related social protections should be accessible to and meet the needs of vulnerable groups whose situation is made more precarious by specific rules, such as those with no recourse to public funds.

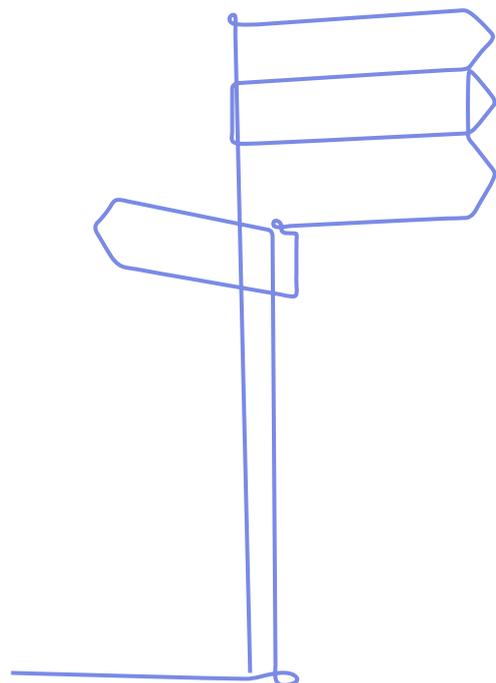
Recommendation 9: The UK Government should use diplomatic levers, drawing on its strong international leadership on modern slavery, to promote adoption of guiding principles on actions against modern slavery in emergency situations. While international law obliges states to continue anti-slavery and anti-trafficking action in emergency situations, none of the existing legal instruments make specific reference to anti-trafficking activity in the context of public health emergencies, and limited reference to broader emergencies. The evidence showing that anti-trafficking efforts were hampered in many countries during the pandemic demonstrates a clear need for specific guiding principles to reinforce states' obligations. Modern Slavery PEC-funded [research](#) carried out by the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery proposes 11 guiding principles. The UK Government could promote these through the G7 and G20 and building on the Call to Action to end modern slavery.

Legal Enforcement

Recommendation 10: Law enforcement and criminal justice agencies across the UK should assess the potential for remote/online mechanisms for promoting victim engagement in the criminal justice process. The evidence shows that these are promising practices and could help address the long-standing challenges of engaging people with lived experience of modern slavery.

Areas for further research

- There is a need for longitudinal and follow-up surveys with workers in supply chains, to understand how risk and vulnerability is changing over time. We recommend building on innovative methodologies employed by some studies which used the ILO forced labour indicators as a framework for data collection, as this will enable comparability of data over time.
- The pandemic has highlighted the connections between modern slavery and wider issues, and how the design of legal and policy frameworks can increase or reduce risks of modern slavery. For example, how the design of social support measures affects the specific needs of those with lived experience of modern slavery. Further research is needed to understand these intersections and deepen understanding of modern slavery in a systemic way.
- The majority of empirical research has examined changes to forced labour in supply chains, further research is needed on how other forms of modern slavery have changed and whether a revised approach is needed (such as trafficking for sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation and domestic servitude).
- This Policy Brief has shown how it is possible to look at changes to underlying drivers of modern slavery as 'proxy indicators' to understand how the overall scale of modern slavery may be changing. Further research could hone and refine this approach to develop a model to measuring the scale of modern slavery, which can help inform the policy response when accurate prevalence measurements are not possible.



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The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre was created by the investment of public funding to enhance understanding of modern slavery and transform the effectiveness of law and policies designed to overcome it. With high quality research at its heart, the Centre brings together academics, policymakers, businesses, civil society, survivors and the public on a scale not seen before in the UK to collaborate on solving this global challenge.

The Centre is a consortium of six academic organisations led by the Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law and is funded by the Art and Humanities Research Council on behalf of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

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