

# Impact of Covid-19 on Romanian and Bulgarian workers in UK agriculture

## Research Summary

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Research by:



University of  
**Nottingham**  
Rights Lab



Gangmasters &  
Labour Abuse Authority



This is a Research Summary of *Understanding risks of exploitation for vulnerable migrant workers in the UK after Covid-19*, funded by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (the Modern Slavery PEC), through the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The research team was comprised of Oana Burcu, Alison Gardner and Charlotte Gray. The full report can be accessed on the Rights Lab website at [www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2021/July/Impact-of-Covid-19-on-Romanian-and-Bulgarian-Workers-in-the-UK-Agriculture.pdf](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2021/July/Impact-of-Covid-19-on-Romanian-and-Bulgarian-Workers-in-the-UK-Agriculture.pdf).

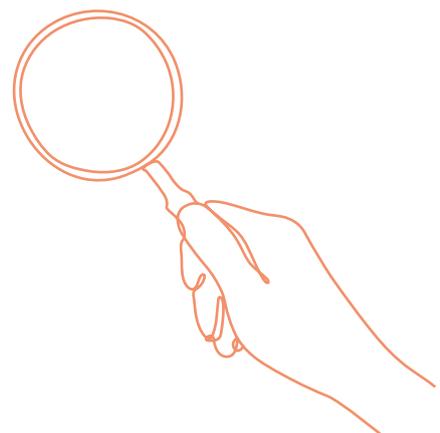
The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Modern Slavery PEC. This project was funded through an open call for proposals to examine the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on modern slavery.

## Background

The research considered the impacts of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic on working conditions for Romanian and Bulgarian migrant workers in the UK. The majority of workers surveyed in the research worked in the agriculture and food industry, and the research also considered lessons learned by businesses in these industries in responding to the pandemic. Previous evidence has suggested that migrant workers are vulnerable to labour exploitation, for example due to the often seasonal and temporary nature of their employment. The research conceived “labour exploitation” as existing on a continuum, ranging from deviations from “decent work” standards set by the International Labour Organization (ILO) to major labour violations, such as labour exploitation and forced labour.

## Methodology

This research was conducted between January and March 2021. It involved an online survey of 439 UK-based Romanian and Bulgarian migrant workers in seasonal and permanent jobs, mainly within the agricultural and food industries. The research team partnered with NGOs and businesses to disseminate the survey to these workers. The research also included a literature review and 29 interviews with stakeholders comprising businesses, labour authorities, migrant workers, NGOs, unions and other organisations representing business interests. Despite including the views of a hard-to-reach migrant worker population and sampling a range of views from prominent stakeholders from the food and agricultural industry, the findings are not intended to be generalised to the whole migrant Romanian and Bulgarian population or businesses in the UK.



## Key findings

- 67% Romanian and Bulgarian workers reported to be negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, potentially making them more vulnerable to exploitation. Many workers struggled to cover basic expenses and ran into debt due to being furloughed and having to rely on 80% of their regular wage, being placed on statutory sick pay, having had their work hours reduced and, in some cases, losing their jobs.
- Some workers faced additional pressures, with reports of problematic practices including not being allowed to take breaks at work and enforcing overtime.
- Covid-19 amplified existing vulnerabilities, such as working on non-permanent contracts, lack of language skills or lower literacy.
- The systemic challenges faced by businesses and enforcement agencies limited the inspection and regulatory oversight of workplaces and had potential negative effects on workers' vulnerability to exploitation.

## Key findings

### **1. The research indicated that Romanian and Bulgarian workers were negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, making them more vulnerable to exploitation.**

- The most significant negative impacts of the pandemic were the reduced number of working hours reported by 36% of respondents, followed by 25% who struggled to pay rent, 18% who had to borrow money specifically from a friend or a bank to cover basic living expenses, 9% who were not allowed to take breaks at work and 9% who had their wage reduced. Previous evidence suggests these factors may increase the vulnerability of workers to exploitation.
- This has been particularly exacerbated by the fact that approximately 80% of the survey respondents were paid the minimum wage, so reduced hours have had significant impact on their income. Furlough schemes and job losses, even if temporary, as well as relying on statutory sick pay of £95.00 a week when testing positive for Covid-19 and required to self-isolate, left many workers struggling with covering basic expenses.
- With some workers going on furlough or sick leave and businesses grappling with volatile market during the pandemic, some workers reported additional pressures. 18% of respondents reported working paid overtime, with reports about problematic practices such as a lack of warning in advance and not being able to refuse overtime, as well as lack of breaks and unpaid overtime. 2% of workers reported experienced physical abuse.

## 2. Some of the problems related to Covid-19 were connected to already existing vulnerabilities.

- Workers on non-permanent contracts reported more issues than other respondents, with 40% of seasonal workers reporting reduced working hours compared to 24% of those on permanent contracts. Seasonal workers were more likely to struggle to pay rent and borrow money, including from people they did not know well.
- 41% of workers identified language as the most significant barrier to flagging problems at the workplace, followed by 28% identifying the fear of losing their job and 24% being unsure how and with whom to raise concerns.
- The Roma ethnic group appears to have been more harshly affected by the pandemic, and individual vulnerabilities such as lower literacy, lack of language skills and knowledge of their rights were more often reported than in other ethnic groups in the survey. The research indicated that Roma were more likely to experience problems in the workplace since they arrived to the UK, including physical abuse (17% compared to 2% in the rest of the cohort), not being issued with a contract (31% compared to 7%), and working below the minimum wage (18% compared to 8%).
- Beyond the impact of Covid-19, people reported that since they have been working in the UK (starting both before and during the pandemic), they have experienced a number of problems at the workplace, including emotional abuse or threats (14%), not being issued with a work contract, payslips and P45 (11%), working below minimum wage (10%), not receiving holiday pay (7%), not being allowed to take holiday (7%), having their wages withheld (7%), lack of breaks (5%) and physical abuse (4%).

## 3. The systemic challenges faced by businesses and enforcement agencies during the pandemic had potential knock-on effects on workers

- The pandemic limited the inspection and regulatory oversight of workplaces. For example, the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) suspended in-person inspections, only conducting inspections via telephone, which limited their ability to recognise potential workplace abuses. However, remote interviews provided some unexpected advantages. Often conducted outside regular working hours, they offered the opportunity for workers to raise issues anonymously and safely.
- Despite observing good practice amongst some businesses, visibility within supply chains was narrowed during the pandemic, potentially increasing risks of exploitative practices across the supply chain.
- Agricultural businesses employing Romanian and Bulgarian workers have faced unprecedented challenges caused by Covid-19. The hospitality sector shut-down limited the demand for some products, whilst companies faced higher costs of putting in place new procedures, PPE equipment, and recruitment of staff at a short notice. On average, 62% of the respondents were satisfied with a range of health and safety protective measures put in place at the workplace, with 26% expressing dissatisfaction with the measures.

## Brexit concerns

In light of unprecedented challenges for both workers and businesses brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, issues brought by Brexit add an additional dimension. Businesses interviewed expressed concern about the labour workforce shortage in light of the new visa system which imposes a cap of 30,000 visas for seasonal workers in the edible horticulture sector. Some in the industry also voiced concern about businesses with labour shortages potentially turning to employing workers illegally, increasing worker vulnerability to exploitation. Others, particularly from NGOs, were also worried about the potential dependency of workers sponsored by the seasonal work scheme operators.

## Priority recommendations

**The full research report identifies a comprehensive set of recommendations for the UK Government, enforcement agencies, employers, the media and trade unions. The report's recommendations aim to address issues identified by the research and can be grouped around the following broad themes:**

### Improving access to employment-related advice and support for workers

Employers should provide workplace support for workers (such as helplines and buddying schemes) and the Government and enforcement agencies should co-develop communication campaigns for workers, focusing on issues such as accessing support to report workplace abuses. Good business practice could also address the issues around language barriers, i.e. communication and employment contracts should be provided in a wide range of languages.

### More effective enforcement of labour rights

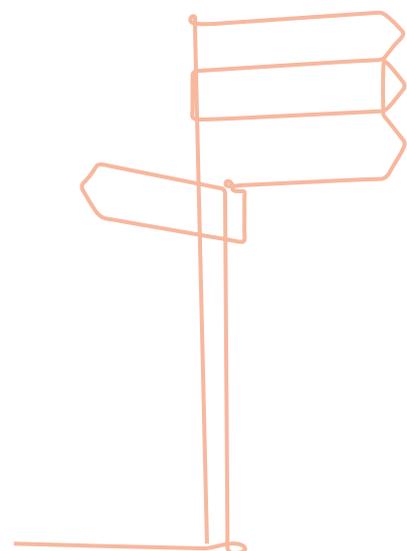
The UK Government should ensure that the planned Single Enforcement Body for labour rights has adequate resources to address the full spectrum of labour market violations and that the planned enforcement body is visible to workers.

### Improving regulation around existing labour rights

The UK Government should ensure that levels of statutory sick pay are sufficient to cover basic needs and use of zero hours contracts is reduced.

### Building partnerships to increase inclusivity of the labour market

Trade unions and community-based NGOs should work in closer partnership to support migrant and seasonal workers; NGOs within migrant communities should be funded to advocate for migrant workers' rights.



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