



7 MINUTE BRIEFING

Prevention and identification of children and young adults experiencing, or at risk of, modern slavery in the UK' project.



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- ▶ Prevention and identification of children and young adults experiencing, or at risk of, modern slavery in the UK' project. The research was conducted in collaboration between the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham and ECPAT UK
- ▶ This research provides a comprehensive analysis of initiatives to improve the prevention and early identification of children who are victims, or at risk of, modern slavery in the United Kingdom from 2015 to 2023.
- ▶ During this period, there has been a growing awareness of the issue, marked by legislative changes and various policy initiatives following the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and similar legislative packages in devolved administrations. There have been improved measures to address modern slavery of children during this period



Key Findings

- ▶ Local authorities referred the largest share of potential victims experiencing modern slavery as children into the NRM from 2015-2023, representing 47% (16,446 children) of all referrals across this period. This highlights the critical role of local authorities as first responders in cases of child modern slavery.
- ▶ Half of all local authorities that referred children into the NRM from 2018-2023 could not provide basic information such as gender, nationality, location of exploitation, exploitation type, county lines, reasonable grounds decision and conclusive grounds decision, on the children that they had referred in response to FOI requests submitted in this project



Risk Factors

- A key risk factor of modern slavery of children is the vulnerability of childhood, as many are targeted simply because of their age, experience, knowledge, and maturity level.
- Other prevalent risk factors identified in this study include not having protective family and guardians surrounding them, as well as being subject to neglect and abuse. This may involve children in care of local authorities and children with a history of adverse childhood experiences such as divorce, domestic violence, abuse, neglect, parental mental health issues, or parental substance misuse.
- For children in care, the shortage of appropriate placements and the frequency of missing episodes significantly increases risk of exploitation
- As young people move into adulthood there is significantly less support, this includes the drop of support for children formerly in local authorities' care and for those with protective parents or carers, who will have less influence and authority over decision making.



Risk factors

- The socio-economic background of children has a significant impact on their vulnerability, as families experiencing poverty often induces instability for the children. Examples include parents who may be absent due to working multiple jobs, families not having secure accommodation or secure access to food, and children not being able to maintain education due to an expectation to work to help provide for the family.
- A key risk factor to exploitation is an unstable immigration status. Recent legislative measures such as the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and Illegal Migration Act 2023 may increase risks of exploitation for children, as the threat of removal from the UK is likely to prevent coming forward to be identified as exploited in modern slavery.
- Children with special educational needs and disabilities, as well as those outside of education including through school exclusion and drop out, are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Lack of access to legal aid in school exclusion appeals also hinders the ability to prevent exploitation.



Early Identification

- Analysis of published local authority policy documents demonstrates that child modern slavery and exploitation are most substantially addressed in multi-agency working documents. In these documents, child modern slavery concerns usually shape the whole of the policy and ensure a comprehensive approach from identification to prevention and protection. By contrast, other policy documents either do not engage with child modern slavery or exploitation at all, or peripherally address these practices.
- Limited awareness of terms such as ‘trafficking’ and ‘exploitation’, coupled with the absence of certain statutory definitions and variations in definitions provided by local agencies, leads to different interpretations and creates gaps in early identification.
- Frontline professionals overlook indicators of exploitation due to a lack of understanding as well as institutional barriers that significantly hinder early identification. Insufficient or non-existent training provision for first responders and specific training for local authorities’ children’s services who have duties and obligation to children are also barriers to effective early identification responses



Early identification

- There is a lack of a comprehensive and overarching child exploitation strategy that addresses the gaps in existing legislation, particularly focusing on early identification initiatives. Resources are a significant issue hindering prevention and early identification efforts. Local authorities and police forces face challenges due to reduced budgets and increasing workload, thus resulting in limited capacity for frontline professionals.
- The lack of effective communication with children poses further obstacles to identification efforts with a notable gap in engaging directly with children and young people to gather their perspectives on policy and practice initiatives.
- Institutional barriers due to assumptions, stereotypes, and biases within organisations significantly impede early identification efforts particularly for children from minority communities.
- Effective early identification initiatives include: understanding indicators of exploitation; multiagency responses; children's rights compliant intelligence gathering; quality training for professionals; building trust with children; avoiding stereotyping victim profiles; resolving victim blaming language; preventing victim criminalisation; investing in families and communities; and ensuring the critical role of professionals in education.



Recommendations



1. UK Government must ensure that all departments in central, devolved and local governments have sufficient funding and resources to address and effectively respond to modern slavery of children and young people. In particular, local authority children services must be sufficiently resourced to implement preventative services and effective interventions.
2. The Department for Education, other relevant bodies of devolved administrations, and local authorities should develop and implement early intervention programmes with adequate support provision based on inclusive models and holistic approaches that account for the diverse needs of children and young people vulnerable to modern slavery.
3. UK Government must develop, in collaboration with devolved administrations, relevant government departments, and civil society, a UK-wide evidence-based, time-bound, child exploitation strategy.
4. The Department for Education, other relevant bodies of devolved administrations, and local authorities must improve data collection and disaggregation on all forms of child exploitation, including by creating a standardised system and reporting of information from local authority children's services.