

# The prevention of adult exploitation and trafficking

A synthesis of research commissioned  
by the Modern Slavery and Human  
Rights Policy and Evidence Centre

Research report

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Research by:



The University of  
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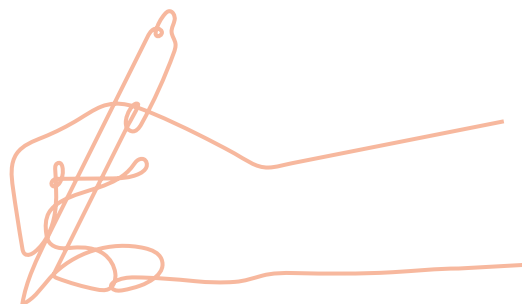
## Summary

This report presents learning on modern slavery prevention among adults from the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre's (PEC) portfolio of funded studies 2020-24. Studies were diverse and only two commissioned funding streams were prevention focussed during this time. All studies were, however, assessed for their relevance to prevention.

Using evidence synthesis methods and a public health framework, the analysis revealed:

- Almost all research in the portfolio was relevant to prevention; however, most reporting was implicit
- The evidence base was limited on:
  - Prevention before exploitation and harm occurs (primary prevention)
  - Early intervention or secondary prevention
  - Preventing re-trafficking.
- The full range of pathways to prevention (access; literacy; deterrence and disruption, power and control and partnerships) were often implied. A clearer articulation of pathways of prevention in studies would be helpful e.g. in theories of change or logic models.
- Insights on prevention were possible from the multiple examples of failures to act or how actions reinforced or generated exploitation, re-trafficking and harm.
- Prevention is complex, dynamic, under-theorised, collaborative and multi-agency. Research and policy would benefit from clearer examples of how prevention can be organised as a system.

Overall, the report makes 16 practical suggestions for the future of modern slavery prevention research and policy, with a particular emphasis on actions for the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC.



# Introduction

Preventing human trafficking and exploitation sits at the heart of global goals, activism and policy agendas. The apparent continuity and estimated growth of many forms of exploitation<sup>(1,2)</sup>, however, indicates that this goal remains elusive. This evidence synthesis adds to a growing evidence base and evidence-informed policy environment that signifies redoubled effort to address this persistent and apparently growing problem. Drawing from the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) portfolio of commissioned studies from its first phase of funding (2020-2024), the synthesis identifies the profile of prevention in its research, the characteristics of studies, the themes of prevention-relevant research and the gaps in the evidence base. The report derives insight from a body of work on adult exploitation and trafficking, sitting alongside a companion review on preventing child exploitation and trafficking which will be published in the coming weeks. In conclusion, the report notes recommendations for research and policy.

## Background and approach

This evidence synthesis on the prevention of adult exploitation and trafficking draws exclusively from the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC's funded portfolio (projects with reports completed between 2020- summer 2024 with some studies from the first phase of the Centre's work forthcoming and not captured in this report). It uses study reports to develop an understanding of and recommendations for research and policy direction on the prevention of modern slavery among adults.

### Our research questions

- What is the volume and range of studies that relate to the prevention of adult trafficking/exploitation in the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC funded portfolio?
- What are the characteristics of studies that provide prevention insight?
- What levels of prevention (Before, Early, Treat, Re-trafficking – BETR) are analysed and considered across the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC portfolio?
- What are the main prevention knowledge gains and gaps in the portfolio?

The synthesis draws heavily on the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC funded study: *Prevention of adult sexual and labour exploitation in the UK: What does or could work?*(3) for its definitions, concepts and analytical framework. This participatory review offered a definition of prevention, adopted here:

**Prevention is an on-going process of avoiding and minimising exploitation and harm. This can be achieved by intervening before harm occurs, by intervening early and by treating harms. It also includes action to prevent re-exploitation and re-trafficking. Prevention includes enabling people to exercise choice and control over their lives and to thrive.**

The present synthesis uses conceptual tools from the report, particularly the BETR Prevention Continuum and the pathways of prevention.

**Figure 1: The BETR continuum and the pathways of prevention**

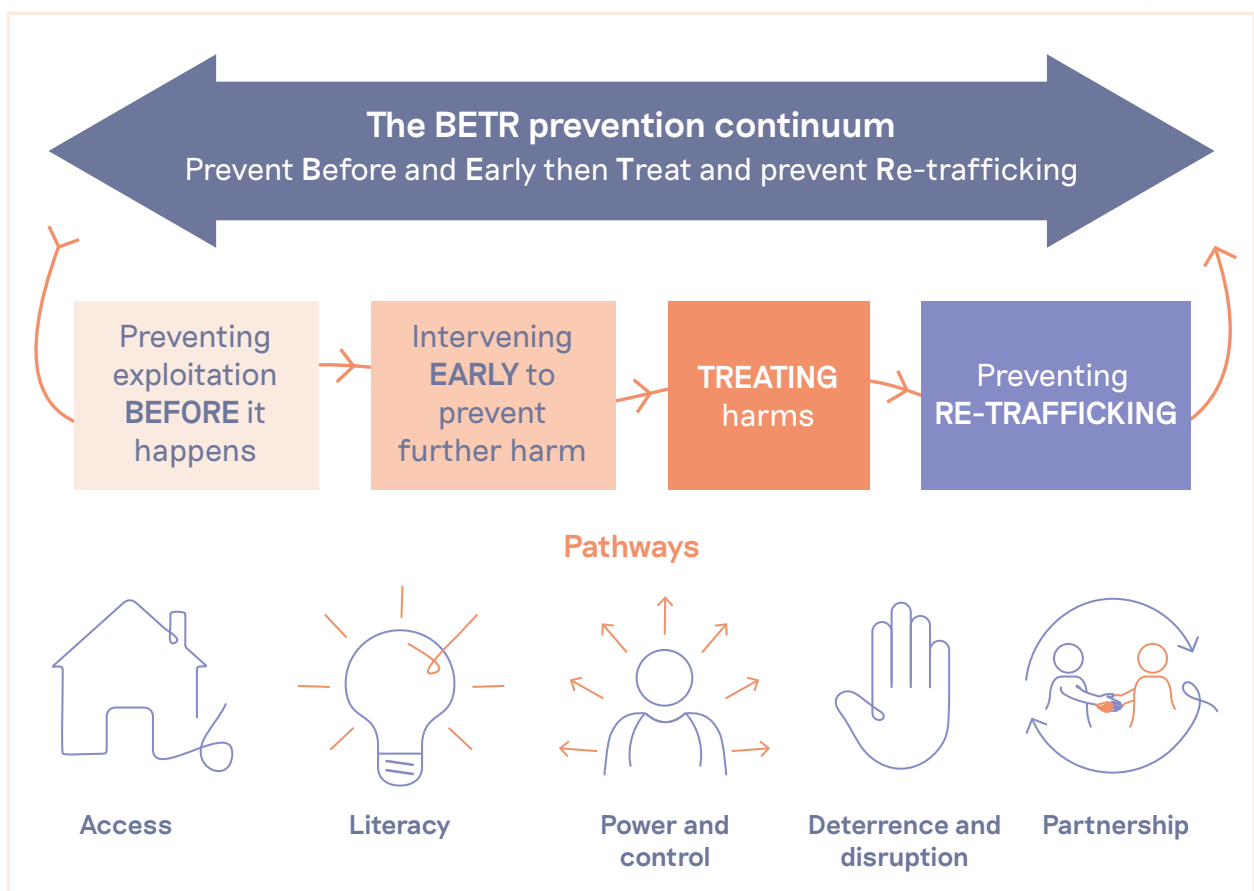
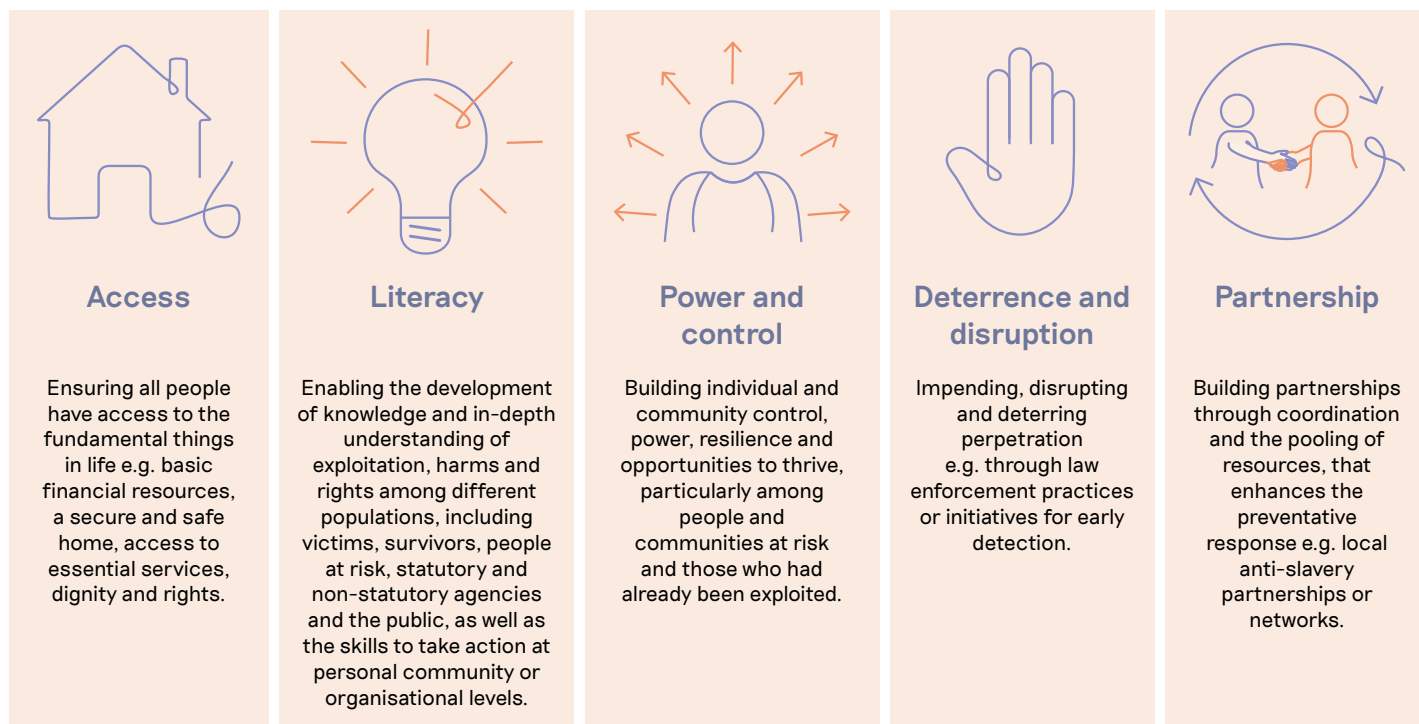


Figure 1 summarises the approach, showing that prevention can occur Before exploitation, as Early intervention, to 'Treat' exploitation after harm has been experienced and as a means of preventing Re-trafficking (BETR). This model, derived from a public health approach to prevention(4,5), sits across a continuum of activity. It can also be understood as a cycle, with opportunities to prevent exploitation and trafficking apparent at different stages of exploitation(3). The BETR prevention continuum refers to both preventing people from becoming victims (being harmed) or perpetrators (becoming harm-doers). We acknowledge these boundaries are not always well defined with harm (doing and being harmed) sometimes sharing many of the same risk factors(6).

Mechanisms of prevention intervention refer to the evidence-derived pathways that arrest or mitigate the processes of trafficking and exploitation and the harm it creates. These are defined and summarised in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Pathways to prevention through intervention across the BETR continuum**



## Methods

The review adopted evidence synthesis methods. Using a systematised approach to the literature, we collated, downloaded and sifted through each study applying inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Appendix A), including only those studies focused on adults (aged 18 years or more). The software EPPI-Reviewer 6(7) was used to manage the review process.

A further phase of sifting was conducted after the recovered reports underwent basic data extraction, including coding of study characteristics. We also coded reports on the extent to which prevention issues were addressed. Data extraction was conducted using thematic coding.

At the study's mid-point (March 2024), the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC's Lived Experience Advisory Panel were consulted online. We covered issues such as the research questions, the purpose of the review and initial, basic insights on prevention. This was done alongside our colleagues conducting the companion review on the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC funded portfolio on preventing child exploitation and trafficking. Although we only had a short time for discussion to cover both projects (two hours), the panel helpfully steered the work, critiquing the definition of prevention (suggesting 'treatment' may be misleading or medicalising) and endorsing the focus on improving prevention especially with the purpose of stopping exploitation and trafficking from happening in the first instance.

## Studies included in the review

In total, 44 study reports were screened, resulting in 37 included for analysis. Seven studies were excluded because of the population (children and young people, n=1); publication type (not a report of a funded study, n=4); and evidence content (a long list of potential survivor outcomes, n=1). One further study by Such et al.(3) was explicitly focussed on the prevention of adult sexual and labour exploitation and excluded from overall analysis of the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC portfolio. Rather, it was used as an analytical framework for the synthesis. A full list of included studies is provided in Appendix B.

# Findings

The findings of the synthesis are presented in two main parts:

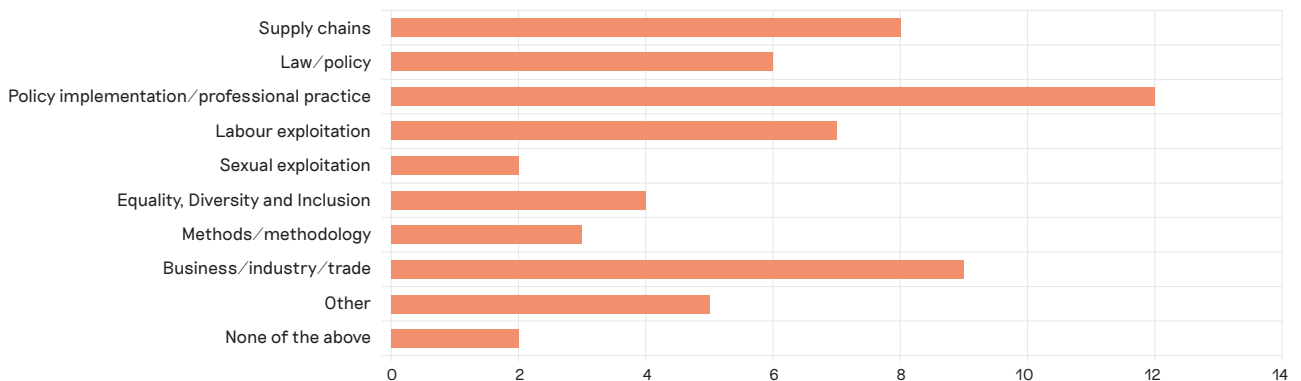
1. The overall characteristics of the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC portfolio on adult exploitation and trafficking, including:
  - a. the overall characteristics of the portfolio in relation to the prevention of adult exploitation and trafficking
  - b. the nature and depth of prevention as a topic of interest in the studies.
2. The themes of studies where prevention was explicit, including:
  - a. main findings across the BETR prevention continuum
  - b. emergent topics on the failure to prevent exploitation/trafficking and inequities in prevention.

## 1. Overall characteristics of the portfolio on adult exploitation and trafficking

The Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC funded portfolio of studies on adult exploitation and trafficking was diverse and wide-ranging.

Some key characteristics include:

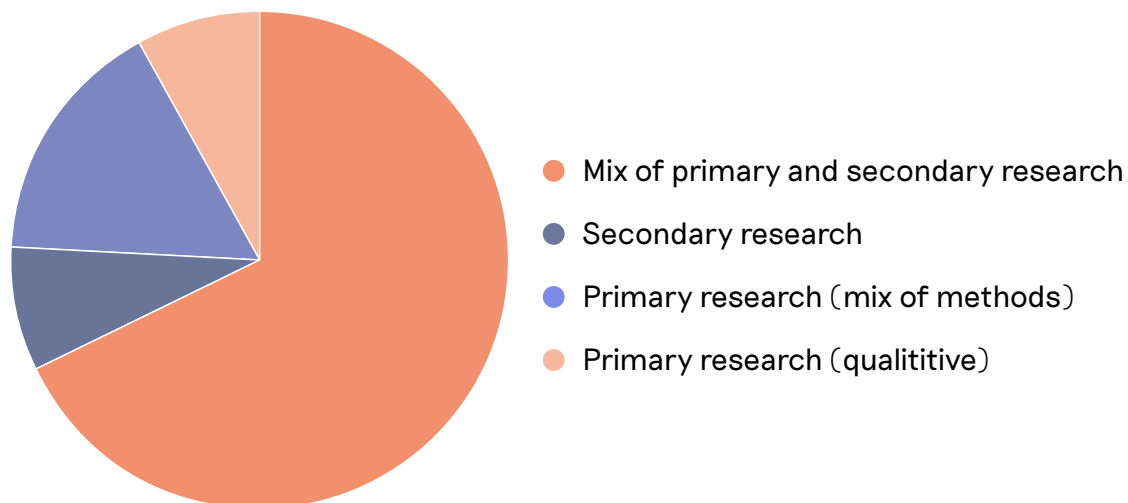
**Figure 3: Theme/topic of study**



NB Single reports were coded to several topics where appropriate

'Other' topics included modern slavery victims in prisons, consumer awareness, assessing the case for a Global Commission on modern slavery, examining source countries and how technology could enable/mitigate exploitation.

**Figure 4: Study type**



Out of the 37 studies, the UK was the dominant context (n=21), three focused exclusively on Lower Middle Income Countries and 13 brought together insight from multiple countries. One study was unclear about national context.

Sample populations were dominated by professionals working in a range of contexts such as service delivery, trade and investment and policy environments (n=30). Thirteen studies included people defined as survivors, victims or people with lived experience of modern slavery in samples. Six reports specified inclusion of people who had been exploited for labour; one study specified inclusion of people who had been sexually exploited.

Notable absences in the portfolio included studies explicitly relating to:

- Domestic servitude and forced marriage
- Forced criminal exploitation (e.g. begging, drug running, benefit fraud) and connected issues e.g. cuckooing (a practice where people take over another's home and use the property to facilitate exploitation)
- Organ harvesting
- Minoritised populations, aside from migrant populations living in difficult circumstances e.g. LGBTQ+ populations, disabled people

Many of the studies were designed to explore the nature of trafficking and exploitation and its enablers in specific contexts and at particular time points (contemporary UK focus, primarily). Overall, research was largely exploratory, descriptive and explanatory, often answering 'what', 'why' or 'how' questions.



Research in the portfolio was not interventional in terms of developing, piloting, testing or evaluating interventions. One study produced an actionable output – a toolkit (Modern Slavery Core Outcomes Set) – suitable for piloting (Papphitis et al. 2023). All reports produced policy or practice recommendations and there were notable guidance documents produced, for example, for investors (Cranston et al. 2024) and for a new Global Commission on modern slavery (Hilland et al. 2022).

One study included research-within-research, namely the development of survivor peer researchers as part of a broader study on mental health and wellbeing (Dang et al. 2023)

### 1.1. The centrality of prevention in studies

Almost all studies in the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC portfolio had a prevention implication. The connection to prevention was, however, not always made explicit in reports. This observation reflects the specific ways in which studies were framed to respond to calls from the funder. Only two calls – one responsive and one open call – explicitly foregrounded prevention. As a result, we categorised studies into those where the authors were seeking to address prevention questions and those who were not. Studies that most explicitly focussed on prevention were subject to deep data extraction and analysis (n=14). None of the 37 studies explicitly defined what was meant by prevention.

**Suggestion 1:** Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC to consider how prevention is framed, defined and foregrounded in future research funding calls

Examples of studies with an implicit prevention concern but no direct and depth exploration of prevention included:

- Carrington et al. (2021). *Exploration of consumer awareness and (in)action towards modern slavery*. This study addressed an important ‘demand-side’ issue with potential to prevent exploitation and harm across the BETR continuum. Its primary goal, however, was to explore the complexities and patterns of consumer decision making. This provided some insight into prevention, albeit indirectly. The report, for example, recommended that raising consumer awareness of modern slavery was of limited utility in changing consumer behaviour. Drawing out this finding’s prevention implications suggests that reducing the demand for cheap labour (and preventing exploitation before harm is done) requires more than awareness-raising initiatives alone.

- Ostmann et al. (2021). *Data for investor action on modern slavery. A landscape analysis*. This study explored the insights available to investors relating to modern slavery. Investment behaviour is a demand-side intervention that, at scale, could prevent exploitation and trafficking before harm occurs. The context and background of the study acknowledged this but the report itself is primarily an investigation of investors' information needs, data and future means of establishing more informed investor decisions.
- Hilland et al. (2022). *Assessing the case for a Global Commission on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking*. In this study, the assessment of need is placed in the context of increased estimated global prevalence (a failure of prevention) and positions a Global Commission as a preventative tool. Indeed, a recommendation of the report is to "consider focusing on pre-exploitation systemic causes of modern slavery, which are less represented in the work than post-exploitation issues" (p.3), in other words, a focus on primary prevention. The report, however, is an overall assessment of the modern slavery landscape and how a Commission might be configured and governed rather than an exploration of prevention *per se*.
- Dang et al. (2023). *Placing survivor wellbeing on the policy and evidence map*. This study explored the mental health and wellbeing of survivors of trafficking and exploitation and access to psychological assistance. The study identified five key protective factors for mental wellbeing: enhancing control, increasing resilience and community assets, facilitating participation, promoting inclusion and safety. These principles of support could be described as tertiary prevention mechanisms and, if experienced among survivors, could lead to the prevention of re-trafficking. The study itself, however, referred to prevention rarely; significant reinterpretation was required by the reviewers and so the study was not chosen for detailed data extraction.
- Gauci et al. (2023) *Impacts of a lack of legal advice on adults with lived experience of modern slavery*. Access to legal advice among survivors is a potentially important element of tertiary and re-trafficking prevention. Responding to a funding call on access to services, the study did not, however, contain research questions that directly related to prevention and so was excluded from the process of detailed data extraction.

In many cases it was difficult to extract prevention insights directly from studies because of their focus and design. In other words, much research was *prevention-relevant* but not *prevention-focussed*.

## 1.2. The prevention concerns of studies

Research relating to prevention in the 14 studies subject to deep data extraction could be characterised as largely fitting within two domains:

## 1. Tertiary prevention / survivor protection

This body of work focussed on preventing further harm once exploitation had occurred. In these cases, the connection to the ways in which tertiary prevention, or the treatment of harms, connected to the prevention of re-trafficking or re-exploitation was not always made. This finding is consistent with the broader literature base(3) as well as with observations about the interventional focus of key international actors(8).

## 2. Primary prevention through the governance of trade and finance

There were four studies of the 14 that related to issues of market supply chains, trade and investment, capital market actors and public procurement (Malisko et al. 2024; Cranston et al. 2024; Khan et al. 2023; Gonzalez et al. 2022). Across the whole portfolio, there were eight studies devoted to supply chain governance. This may reflect the broader observation made by Hilland et al. that the issue of supply chain management is dominant among international anti-slavery actors(8). In principle, anti-slavery market governance, including supply chain management, is a powerful lever to prevent exploitation before it occurs. Effective regulation and auditing may also act as an early intervention mechanism (secondary prevention). Indeed, Islam et al. (2022) identified that failure to audit or regulate could have devastating impacts on women and girls working in precarious labour markets, as was the case in Bangladeshi garment manufacturing during COVID-19. While these studies were helpful for informing changes to the terms of trade to make exploitation less likely, it was less clear if/how modern slavery resistant trade governance mechanisms have resulted in primary prevention at scale.

Beyond these two themes, the evidence base was limited in explicit reference to:

- Prevention before exploitation and harm occurs (primary prevention), especially upstream at a social/policy level and in communities exposed to conditions that are conducive to exploitation and trafficking (community-based or -driven research)
- Early intervention or secondary prevention
- Preventing re-trafficking

**Suggestion 2:** Balance the portfolio with research on upstream primary prevention, early intervention and preventing re-trafficking

**Suggestion 3:** Balance the portfolio with evaluation (or other stages of interventional work) as well as research

## 2. Themes of studies where prevention was most explicit

### 2.1. BEFORE/Primary prevention

#### Trade and investment governance studies

The four studies that focused on trade and investment governance highlighted how actions in supply chain management, investment management and social corporate responsibility measures can *deter and disrupt* trafficking and exploitation, giving workers *access* to the income needed to live a good life. The logic of such action is that anti-trafficking and anti-exploitation measures embedded in trade and investment operations ‘trickle down’ to affect the behaviour of actual/potential exploiters and improve the outcomes of people at risk (through avoidance of exploitation or minimisation of exploitation through regulation and auditing). For example, Cranston et al. recommended investors divested and/or disengaged from products where Uyghur forced labour was likely (Cranston et al. 2024). Divestment and disengagement represented the most extreme preventative action in international trade, especially if it was coordinated between countries. The study team in this case provided tools for investors to operationalise divestment in the Uyghur case. While the logic described above is extractable from the Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC studies, and may well be described elsewhere, the theory of how trade and investment governance affects change in modern slavery risk and outcomes could be made more explicit.

**Suggestion 4:** Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC to consider making preventative mechanisms in research calls and funded studies more clearly articulated.

The upstream preventative mechanism of trade and investment governance is a demand-side intervention and has some support from the evidence base in the reports studied. In their evidence review, Gonzalez et al. note that while evidence of effectiveness is scarce, there were some examples of public procurement measures positively influencing supplier behaviour, reducing modern slavery risk. They cited an example from Pakistan where contract performance clauses applied by Swedish and UK governments improved outcomes, particularly in child labour. They highlighted the importance of contract monitoring in these cases, noting: “The study concluded that social contractual conditions could become ‘merely an administrative burden with little impact’ in the absence of monitoring” (p.18). They assessed the quality of the evidence base in this area, however, as ‘red’, namely: “there are no or very few rigorous research studies on these issues; the evidence base is anecdotal; data sources are very limited”.

Khan et al. (2023) also noted the conditions under which capital market actors could reduce the likelihood of modern slavery in investments. They highlighted senior level buy-in, Board oversight, capacity, capability, governance structures of ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) organisation and active stewardship of investments as important in building robust anti-slavery mechanisms in investment markets.

**Suggestion 5:** Consider funding research that provides more robust evidence on the outcomes of slavery-resistant trade law and governance as a means of primary prevention

**Suggestion 6:** Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC should consider exploring and mobilising a broader range of primary prevention mechanisms in their commissioned research, beyond the deterrence and disruption/access mechanisms of trade and investment governance.

### Studies that acknowledged aspects of primary prevention

Beyond the *deterrence and disruption* and *access* mechanism employed by trade law and governance, other pathways to prevent exploitation and trafficking before it occurred were less explored (see Figure 2 for mechanisms). To recap, these include improving literacy, enabling access to the fundamental enablers of a good life, enhancing personal and community power/control and bringing about more effective prevention through partnership.

Exceptions were:

- studies relating to **missed opportunities** to intervene to reduce risks of exploitation (often relating to the mechanisms: *access, literacy and power and control*);
- studies that provided insight into the **social and economic root causes** of exploitation and how to address them (relating to the *access* mechanism);
- studies reflecting on the value of **lived experience** in designing preventative policies and programmes (relating to the *power and control* mechanism).

On **missed opportunities** to intervene, Murphy et al.'s (2022) study of exploitation and British nationals highlighted: "Missed opportunities by professionals in statutory and non-statutory services resulted in a failure to identify and protect British nationals, including children, prior to exploitation" (p.7). This included opportunities to address missing episodes from schools. (p.13) or opportunities to support complex needs such as substance misuse and mental health issues.

Other studies highlighted the **social and economic root causes** of exploitation and trafficking, all of which were, in principle, modifiable. Murphy et al. (2024) noted the actual or perceived lack of economic opportunities for Albanian nationals alongside the desire to re-establish family bonds overseas as drivers of precarious migration, increasing risks of exploitation. Rights Lab/Free the Slaves (2021) pointed to the ways in which COVID-19 exacerbated existing risk factors for exploitation and trafficking such as increased financial desperation. Islam et al. (2022) identified sexist attitudes and gender-based violence as additional upstream factors leading to the exploitation of women in Bangladesh during the pandemic. These are recognised 'root causes' with the potential for intervention. Indeed, Obokata et al. (2021) highlighted that governments acted on some of these root causes by supporting livelihoods during COVID-19 e.g. job retention, wage subsidies and cash transfers. They also raised concerns that this positive action would be lost in the immediate economic recovery period (Obokata et al. 2021). Authors also referred to macro social issues such as corruption and organised crime as factors underscoring or determining exploitation risk; both of which were amenable to primary preventative action (Murphy et al. 2024; Obokata et al. 2021; Shirgholami et al. 2024).

Asquith et al.'s (2022) study of engagement of **lived experience** in international policy and programming identified that collaborative engagements including employed colleagues with lived experience in policy/programmes improved the efficacy of prevention initiatives. This was owing to the unique insight and understanding offered through lived experience expertise embedded within project teams. This work suggested an overall dual benefit in survivor-involved initiatives: not only did survivor-informed programmes enhance primary prevention for others but also enhanced survivor *power and control*, reducing the likelihood of participant re-trafficking and -exploitation. Asquith et al. (2022) identified a community empowerment model, focussed on resourcing and capacity building in local communities as effective, using an example from Uttar Pradesh, India. This suggests that models of community empowerment could be usefully employed to enhance *access, literacy and power and control* preventative mechanisms. Here, the root causes of labour exploitation were addressed by improving labour conditions, wages, food security, access to medical care and civic participation. Masiko et al., however, warned that lived experience input did not always make a difference to primary prevention measures, citing how unique insights were persistently overlooked in international trade agreements (Masiko et al. 2024, p.29).

The Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set is a good reference point for survivor-defined descriptions of priority minimum outcomes relating to the **determinants of a good life**. Safe and secure housing, access to services and having a fulfilling life (cf. opportunities to thrive in the prevention definition on p.4) are all protective factors in modern slavery prevention.

**Suggestion 7:** Further investment in prevention research, evaluation and policy initiatives that address the root causes of exploitation and trafficking in a range of contexts. Consider the full range of mechanisms or pathways to prevention in investment decisions.

## 2.2. EARLY/Secondary prevention

Seven reports of the 14 that were subject to deep data extraction and analysis had insight into early intervention. Detail in this area was scant, with reviewers making interpretative judgements on the relevance of findings to secondary prevention. Themes were:

### Training and awareness raising

Some studies noted the importance of raising awareness of human trafficking and exploitation as a way of enhancing victim identification. Rights Lab/Free the Slaves (2021), for example, noted a decline in community- and police-based anti-slavery awareness-raising activities during COVID-19 in Kenya, reducing chances of early identification. Shirgholami et al. (2024) identified that people with irregular migrant status had little knowledge of their rights and entitlements in the UK, presenting a barrier to earlier help-seeking. Theimann et al's (2024) study of migrant care and agricultural work in the UK highlighted limited knowledge of rights and legal entitlements among workers.

### Missed opportunities to intervene early

Murphy et al. (2022) reiterated the point made about primary prevention for people at risk of exploitation, highlighting how professionals also missed opportunities to prevent further harm of British nationals once victimisation was apparent. They provided examples of victims being failed despite existing contact with education/criminal justice professionals, social services and health services. The study reported these failures across the BETR prevention continuum. The implication of this is the need for improved professional *literacy* of trafficking and exploitation beyond those with the formal responsibility to identify victims.

### Reporting and safeguarding mechanisms

Sanders et al's (2024) study of adult sex service websites noted that sex buyers required improved means of reporting suspected exploitation. This sat alongside a suite of other primary (legislative and regulatory) measures.

## De-stigmatising, de-shaming and building trust in services

Studies called for active de-stigmatising and de-shaming initiatives. The logic was to encourage earlier detection, reporting and recovery. Such initiatives included: i) destigmatising trafficking and exploitation among victims to encourage disclosure and support-seeking behaviour, ii) destigmatising activities such as legal sex work and legal sex buying and building environments conducive to reporting illegal activity and cooperation with authorities (Sanders et al. 2023; Shirgholami et al. 2024), iii) destigmatising and de-stereotyping populations such as irregular migrants, travellers and sex workers and (Shirgholami et al. 2024), iii) building stigma-informed/shame-informed services to build trust. Importantly, shame and stigma were culturally shaped, requiring culturally competent services (Murphy et al. 2024; Shirgholami et al. 2024). The issue of stigma and shame was also linked to tertiary prevention initiatives that were intentionally trauma-informed; another key mechanism for building trust. There were few descriptions of destigmatising initiatives, although Sanders et al. (2023) recommended a Trust & Safety Centre to provide support, advice, and resources for sex buyers and sellers. Asquith et al. (2022) advocated for lived experience involvement in policy and programming as a principal means of destigmatising anti-slavery initiatives.

**Suggestion 8:** Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC to consider research on what early intervention looks like across different forms of exploitation and trafficking, drawing from similar substantive fields (e.g. violence prevention).

**Suggestion 9:** Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC to examine further the theoretical, conceptual and empirical basis for anti-stigma and anti-shame initiatives as preventative strategies. Policy colleagues to consider anti-stigma and anti-shame interventions, depending on the evidence base.

### 2.3. TREAT/Tertiary prevention

Seven studies from the 14 had explicit findings on the role of preventing further harm or 'treating' harms (tertiary prevention). A further three had findings on how *failure to respond or respond appropriately* led to further exploitation and trafficking risk, re-trafficking/-exploitation and harm.

Within this body of work were concerns about survivor care, support, protection, recovery and improved outcomes. This was pursued as a rightful end itself, enabling people to access their human rights, to recover and build a fulfilling life. The preventative qualities of such goals and interventions – for themselves, their families and for others – were less cited.



**Suggestion 10:** If Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC seek a more prevention-oriented portfolio, the Centre should consider mobilising a prevention perspective more routinely or actively

Across the studies concerned with tertiary prevention, themes included:

- the **needs and priorities** of people in general and in specific settings or contexts (e.g. in prisons, during the COVID-19 pandemic).
- factors to **optimise care and support** (e.g. cultural competency and trauma-informed practice).
- the **structures and systems** that supported or undermined effective tertiary prevention.

### The needs and priority outcomes of survivors

Insight into tertiary prevention was woven throughout the accounts of survivors in the studies reviewed, informed by good and bad experiences of accessing support. These were reflected in the complex and detailed Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set (Paphitis et al. 2023) which provided robust coverage of the outcomes important in survivor care and services. As an extensive evidence-based participatory project that was survivor informed, the report identified a minimum set of seven outcomes that should be measured as part of survivor-focused intervention. They were:

1. Secure and suitable housing.
2. Safety from any trafficker or other abuser.
3. Long-term, consistent support.
4. Compassionate, trauma informed services.
5. Finding purpose in life and self-actualisation.
6. Access to medical treatment.
7. Access to education.

Full descriptions of these priorities and a longlist of additional outcomes were provided by the study. They reflect the preventative mechanisms described in Figure 2 and the definition of prevention adopted by this study. In particular, the seven domains highlight the importance of access to the fundamentals of a good life, providing opportunities to thrive.

These elements of tertiary prevention are in stark contrast to the experiences revealed by survivors of trafficking or people living in more vulnerable circumstances (e.g. agricultural migrant workers). Individual malpractice, poor treatment by organisations and the failure of systems turned environments that could be preventative and health promoting (salutogenic) into harm generating (iatrogenic). Examples included:

- Discriminatory, racist and sexist treatment (e.g. Murphy et al. 2024; Thiemann et al. 2024).
- Labour recruitment malpractice among agencies and employers (e.g. excessive hours, lower than promised wage rates) (Thiemann et al. 2024).
- Long, debilitating waits for decisions in the modern slavery protection and asylum systems (e.g. waiting for a National Referral Mechanism conclusive grounds decision or a claim for asylum) (Thiemann et al. 2024).
- Unsuitable and low standard accommodation (Murphy et al. 2022; Thiemann et al. 2024), sometimes at excessive cost (Thiemann et al. 2024).
- Criminalisation of modern slavery victims through prosecution (Murphy et al. 2022; Jovanović et al. 2023).

**Suggestion 11:** To consider funding/mobilising research to synthesise the ways in which policies and practices (social, organisational and individual) generate exploitation, trafficking and harm and how these generative systems are mutually reinforcing. This work could offer insight into opportunities to intervene to degenerate or demolish reinforcing systems of exploitation, trafficking and harm.

### Optimising care and support

Connected to the reports on the needs and priorities of survivors were findings and reflections on ways in which care and support could be optimised. Three reports – one on UK prisons and two on cultural competence – established how service delivery and service use could be improved.

On prisons, Jovanović et al. noted the introduction of a dedicated role – Modern Slavery single points of contact (SPOC) – within prisons in England and Wales to help identify and support potential and confirmed victims. This could be seen as an early stage and promising development in survivor care. They also identified several possible improvements:

- Enabling survivors of modern slavery with experience of being in prison in the UK to help design and deliver of training and awareness raising about modern slavery to prison staff.
- Making accessible and non-stigmatising awareness raising material and support information to victims/survivors of modern slavery in prison.
- Non-traumatising/-triggering resources to help prison staff identify potential victims and to facilitate disclosure.
- Enhancing prison staffs' capability to make trauma-informed referrals of potential victims of exploitation and trafficking to support mechanisms (the National Referral Mechanism).

On culturally competent service design and delivery, Shirgholami et al. (2024) identified the need to address "structural, relational, and emotional barriers" (p.45) to optimal survivor support. Structural barriers included stigmatising policy environments, relational barriers included discriminatory practices and emotional barriers included a lack of professional curiosity and compassion. They recommended:

1. Embedding culturally competent approaches in local-level statutory and non-statutory agencies' training and development programmes.
2. Building victims' trust and confidence by developing cultural competency skills among service provider staff.
3. Improving victims' awareness of their rights.
4. Increasing awareness of victims' cultural barriers to support among service providers (e.g. shame, stigma, fear).
5. Addressing the inflexibility and dehumanising quality of bureaucratic systems, especially law enforcement and immigration systems.

Mirroring this final point, Murphy et al. (2024) noted the importance (and failure) of support workers and systems to recognise survivors as 'whole persons' and not people only with a history of trafficking and exploitation. They also highlighted how cultural barriers "spanned social, psychological, communicative, informational, and discriminatory dimensions" in service delivery and reception among Albanian nationals. Addressing these challenges required a comprehensive and culturally competent approach that included language access, trauma-informed approaches, community collaboration, safe spaces for open discussion, person-centred support, staff diversity, continuous learning, and promoting inclusivity.

## The structures and systems of effective tertiary prevention

Several studies highlighted the necessity of multi-agency provision and coordination to meet the often-complex needs of survivors (Rights Lab/Free the Slaves 2021; Murphy et al. 2022; Murphy et al. 2024; Jovanović et al. 2023; Paphitis et al. 2023; Shirgholami et al. 2024). It was recognised that different parts of the survivor care system needed to effectively coordinate to, for example, provide health, housing and criminal justice support. It was also noted that failure to coordinate could lead to additional harms and place people at additional risk of exploitation (e.g. when leaving prison or when making the transition from child to adult support services; see below on re-trafficking).

Multi-agency working required clear, frictionless lines of information sharing, for example, Jovanovic et al. recommended information sharing improvements between the Home Office and the Prison Service about those entering prison with an NRM referral. Murphy et al. noted that good practice in multi-agency working was evident for British nationals “when agencies were able to come together within the same space such as education, police, local authority, health (including mental health), victim navigators, youth workers, specialist support organisations” (Murphy et al. 2022, p.17). Overall, however, there were limited examples of what constituted effective multi-agency working, why they were effective, and the outcomes achieved. This is a mechanism of prevention (*partnership*) with a limited explanatory evidence base in the portfolio.

**Suggestion 12:** Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC to consider developing a compendium of examples of **effective multi-agency working for the prevention of different forms of exploitation and trafficking.**

**Suggestion 13:** Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC, policy and service delivery stakeholders to consider how **the data and information sharing can be routinised in an ethical way that promotes prevention.**

## 2.4. Re-trafficking and re-exploitation

There was not a specific study focussed on re-trafficking or re-exploitation prevention in the portfolio. Among the few studies that explicitly cited re-trafficking, findings reflected those relating to tertiary prevention ('treatment'). For example, Murphy et al. 2022 highlighted the importance of British victims having access to safe and secure housing and substance misuse services during exploitation recovery to avoid re-exploitation (having access to the fundamentals of life). In addition, Murphy et al (2022) noted the challenges of 'risky' transition points when people could be lost within systems, for example, when child safeguarding activities ceased, and adult services were meant to take over (Murphy et al. 2022 p.18) (reinforcing the importance of the *partnership* prevention mechanism).

Asquith et al. (2022) identified that including people with lived experience as peer-researchers, peer-providers, consultants and advocates within international policy and programming project teams led to a broad range of benefits including reduced vulnerability and risk of further exploitation (reflecting the *power and control* mechanism).

Finally, Jovanović et al. (2023) reported that prisons needed to be alert to the risk of exploitation and further harm faced by survivors of modern slavery both while in the care of prisons and upon release. With the aim of reducing the risk of exploitation in prison, they recommended that prison staff should conduct risk assessments and that survivors should be protected from sharing accommodation with known or suspected perpetrators of exploitation. They suggested *partnership*/improved communication and contact with the organisations delivering specialist support for people referred to the NRM to enable persons leaving prison to reduce the risks of re-trafficking. They noted the importance of doing this with the consent of survivors.

## 2.5. Failure to prevent or findings on in/action that generates risk of exploitation or actual harm

While the portfolio of studies was not strongly themed towards action *for* prevention of exploitation and trafficking, the body of evidence was strong on how *failures to act* led to increased risk of exploitation and trafficking. In some cases, this led to risks being realised, resulting in trafficking and exploitation; in others it resulted in on-going, accumulating or accelerating harm. Although less examined, it is also plausible that actions that are known to reduce the risk of exploitation may not work for some people in some circumstances and that some actions are unintentionally harmful (see section on harm-generating practices).

**Suggestion 14:** The Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC portfolio of studies would benefit from clearly articulated theories of change; how in/actions can lead to un/intended consequences using, for example, logic models, path dependency models or visualised pathways to prevention.

The evidence on failures to act to prevent trafficking and exploitation was particularly evident in the study by Murphy et al. (2022) on British nationals where criminal action against young people drug dealing combined with the failure to recognise risks that those crimes were committed under duress or coercion led to the criminalisation of the young person, thus elevating their risks of future exploitation and harm.

Other examples of failure to act to prevent trafficking and exploitation included:

- Failure to adequately regulate high risk settings or enforce good governance/standards in such settings (e.g. agricultural work settings; medical glove manufacturing in Malaysia during COVID-19 restrictions [Mahmood et al. 2021]).
- Failure to safeguard when risks or markers of exploitation were elevated (e.g. in a healthcare setting or in the education system cf. Murphy et al. 2022); failure of 'professional curiosity' (Shirgholami et al. 2024).
- Failure to monitor supply chains effectively (i.e. governing supply chains beyond mandatory statements).
- Failure to link services when survivors were moved into different geographical areas for housing reasons (e.g. British nationals being moved to housing outside of area and 'falling through the gaps' during handover, Murphy et al. 2022).
- Failure to act owing to unclear lines of responsibility e.g. British nationals being passed between local authority and victim care contract provision (Murphy et al. 2022).
- Failure to provide accommodation conducive to recovery e.g. cuckooing victims being accommodated with people misusing substances (Murphy et al. 2022).
- Failure to provide adequate mental health support for recovery (Murphy et al. 2022).
- Failure to apprehend illegal charging by recruitment agencies for migrant workers (Theimann et al. 2024).

These failures to act sit across the BETR prevention continuum – from primary to re-trafficking prevention. Some failures are potentially particularly harmful, such as failures in housing, because of the fundamental nature of the need. Safe housing is a known and fundamental protective factor in prevention across the continuum (cf. Paphitis et al. 2023).

Overall, the extent of failures to prevent exploitation and trafficking across the portfolio of studies point towards a possible prevention system failure that requires further understanding and system-level action.

**Suggestion 15:** Prevention system failure should be explored, potentially using systems-informed theories and methods (e.g. informed by systems science).

**Suggestion 16:** If systems of failure are commonplace and interact, Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC may wish to consider studying more outlier examples of excellent systems and practices (exemplars) on which to model preventative activity across systems.

## 2.6. Prevention inequities?

A tentative theme emerging from the studies was how preventative action may not be equally distributed across all populations at elevated risk of trafficking and exploitation. Observations of inequities were apparent in, for example:

- **Differences in legal status.** People with irregular migrant status are known to be at elevated risk of trafficking and exploitation. Pathways to prevention (access, literacy, deterrence and disruption, power and control and partnership) are limited, suggesting additional safeguards are needed. In addition, people in prison appeared to be afforded fewer protections (Jovanović et al. 2023). These observations from the literature suggest people who already experience multiple disadvantage may require additional bespoke support to avoid exploitation and trafficking.
- **Reflections on nationality and identity.** Murphy et al. (2022) identified that the provision of services under the Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract is not well suited to British nationals. In addition, Murphy et al. (2024) and Shirgholami et al. (2024) highlighted that services and systems were insufficiently culturally competent to effectively prevent exploitation and trafficking among migrant and/or minoritised populations. These reflections raise questions about the overall preventative qualities of the UK system and its responsiveness to identity-based differences.
- **Geographical location.** In a UK context, Murphy et al. (2022) note inequities in the nature and extent of local provision for potential victims and survivors. In addition, Jovanović et al. (2023) highlighted the absence of SPOC roles in prisons outside of England and Wales.

There are likely other dimensions of inequities in preventative action not captured in the portfolio of studies. Such et al. (2023) in their study of equality, diversity and inclusion in modern slavery research noted gaps in evidence base on, for example, gender identity and sexual orientation. It is likely that these evidence gaps have implications for the prevention knowledge base.

## Discussion and suggestions

The synthesis of Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC's funded studies on adult exploitation and trafficking has revealed several broad observations and resulted in 16 specific suggestions for the future of prevention research, policy and practice. High level observations include:

### Prevention is complex and dynamic and under-theorised

While the BETR prevention continuum is a helpful conceptual device, it does not fully represent the complexity and dynamicism of the prevention challenge. While many of the studies did not set out to explore prevention explicitly, research was rich, reflecting the complexity of exploitation and trafficking in its different forms and contexts. To enhance the portfolio further and to inform policy and practice decision-making, research could adopt theories and methods that fully reflect this. For example, dynamic examples of trafficking and exploitation over time and space could be represented as experiences over the life course, over migration cycles(9) and/or cycles of exploitation(3). These complex and dynamic experiences could helpfully build frameworks or models of preventative systems. An emergent literature in this area is promising(10,11), as is the policy emphasis on systems-informed decision making (Cabinet Office, n.d.)

### Prevention is fundamentally multi- and inter-sectoral

Studies revealed that solutions are rarely (if ever) 'standalone', single sector 'silver bullets'. Solutions require the focus of multiple agents acting in a coordinated way. This applies across stakeholders including statutory and non-statutory institutions, communities, businesses, policy-makers, investors and citizens (including survivors). This challenge cannot be underestimated and evidence is needed on how this can be built and maintained across systems.

### Repeated calls for improved data and data sharing

Preventative action requires some knowledge of the situation as it stands. It was routine for studies to find data on modern slavery inadequate for analysis (e.g. Cranston et al. 2024; Jovanović et al. 2023). If data were available, there were frequent calls for it to be shared between relevant agencies to enable better targeting of preventative activity. This is a common complaint across the broader literature and policy base(12).



## Involvement of people with lived experience

Studies repeatedly noted the importance of including people with lived experience of exploitation and/or affected communities in matters affecting them. The routine inclusion of people with lived experience in Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC funded studies is a positive reflection of this. Further evaluation of how affected people and survivor leadership can improve and make effective prevention interventions is a likely rich vein of future work for the prevention of trafficking and exploitation.

Specific suggestions arising from the review for Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC for their own portfolio and to mobilise with policy and practice partners are:

**Suggestion 1:** Consider how prevention is framed, defined and foregrounded in future research funding calls

**Suggestion 2:** Balance the portfolio with research on upstream primary prevention, early intervention and preventing re-trafficking

**Suggestion 3:** Balance the portfolio with evaluation (or other stages of interventional work) as well as research

**Suggestion 4:** Consider making preventative mechanisms/pathways to prevention in research studies more clearly articulated

**Suggestion 5:** Consider research that provides more robust evidence on the outcomes of slavery-resistant trade law and governance as a means of primary prevention

**Suggestion 6:** Consider a broader range of primary prevention mechanisms in commissioned research, beyond the deterrence and disruption mechanism of trade and investment governance.

**Suggestion 7:** Further investment in prevention research, evaluation and policy initiatives that address the root causes of exploitation and trafficking in a range of contexts. Consider the full range of mechanisms or pathways to prevention in investment decisions.

**Suggestion 8:** Consider research on what early intervention looks like across different forms of exploitation and trafficking, drawing from similar substantive fields (e.g. violence prevention).

**Suggestion 9:** Examine further the theoretical, conceptual and empirical basis for anti-stigma and anti-shame initiatives as preventative strategies. Policy colleagues to consider anti-stigma and anti-shame interventions, depending on the evidence base.

**Suggestion 10:** If Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC seek a more prevention-oriented portfolio, the Centre should consider mobilising a prevention perspective more routinely or actively within the research community.

**Suggestion 11:** To conduct research to synthesise the ways in which policies and practices (social, organisational and individual) generate exploitation, trafficking and harm and how these generative systems are mutually reinforcing. This work could offer insight into opportunities to intervene to degenerate or demolish reinforcing systems of exploitation, trafficking and harm.

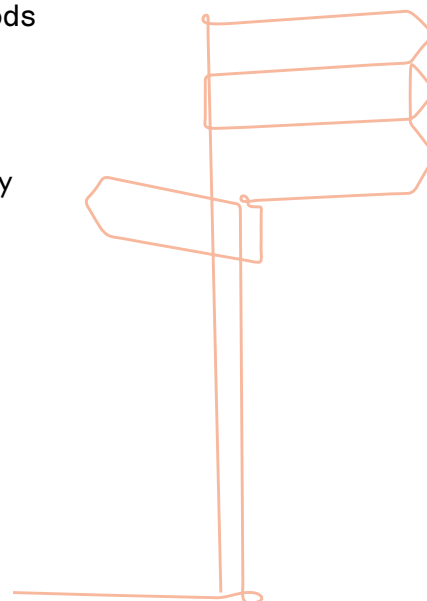
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# Appendices

## Appendix A

### Inclusion/exclusion criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Population: adults (aged 18+). Reports where at least some of the population of concern are adults AND the focus is on adults	Population: children (aged <18 years), or adults reflecting on their experiences as children
Original studies using any methodology (including both primary and secondary research)	Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC synthesis studies (i.e. synthesis reports of Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC studies)
Full reports of research studies	Summary reports External publications arising from Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC funded studies; Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC Policy briefings; Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC legal analyses (e.g. section 45 of the MSA2015); Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC Evidence submissions.

# Appendix B

## Full list of relevant studies (\* fully data extracted)

1. Sumner M. Singhal D. Davis M. and Voss H. (2021). *Impact of Covid-19 on Indian fashion supply chains*. <https://www.modernslaverypec.org/resources/india-fashion-supply-chains>
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# MODERN SLAVERY & HUMAN RIGHTS

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EVIDENCE  
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The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery and Human Rights PEC) works to enhance understanding of modern slavery and transform the effectiveness of law and policies designed to address it. The Centre funds and co-creates high-quality research with a focus on policy impact, and 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.

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