

# Geographic patterns of exploitation and referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in the UK

## Research briefing

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Research by:

# Executive summary

This briefing was commissioned by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (MSPEC), part of the University of Oxford and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). It is the third in a three-part series based on quantitative analysis of the UK National Referral Mechanism (NRM) dataset by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The briefings are focused on improving understanding about referrals and decision-making.<sup>1</sup>

This briefing explores geographic and demographic patterns of exploitation and referral recorded in the NRM between 2014 and 2025. The NRM is the UK's system for formally identifying and supporting victims of modern slavery. This briefing analyses differences in victim profiles, exploitation types, and referral practices across counties and the regions of the UK.<sup>2</sup>

Geographic disparities in exploitation and referral are pronounced. Most referrals originate from inland and urban counties, yet coastal, rural, and border counties exhibit distinctive exploitation patterns and vulnerabilities. Counties with major transportation hubs and those with high numbers of child, male, or female victims also stand out for their unique referral and exploitation dynamics. The findings highlight the importance of local context in shaping both the risks and the responses to modern slavery in the UK.

The analysis finds marked shifts in the demographics of referred victims over time, with men and boys now representing a growing majority of referrals and UK nationals, especially children (under the age of 18), accounting for an increasing share of referrals. The briefing also suggests there may be significant delays between exploitation and referral, with many victims' reaching adulthood before being referred, particularly among boys. No strong or significant correlations were found between caseload volumes within a county and rates of negative decisions at reasonable or conclusive grounds stage. Similarly, no clear relationship was identified between referral volumes and diaspora size. Further research is needed to explore the determinants of the victims' outcome in the NRM and those of their vulnerability to modern slavery.

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1. The first briefing *Seeing beyond the negative: An examination of key variables in the different reasons for the decisions not to formally recognise people as survivors of modern slavery* is available here [https://files.modernslaverypec.org/production/assets/downloads/MSPEC\\_IOM\\_report\\_FINAL-full-report.pdf?dm=1762445798](https://files.modernslaverypec.org/production/assets/downloads/MSPEC_IOM_report_FINAL-full-report.pdf?dm=1762445798) and the second briefing *A second chance to be seen and protected Analysis of policy and data on reconsideration requests for negative decisions from the National Referral Mechanism* is available here [https://files.modernslaverypec.org/production/assets/downloads/MSPEC\\_NRM\\_Report\\_FINAL-second-briefing.pdf?dm=1765449152](https://files.modernslaverypec.org/production/assets/downloads/MSPEC_NRM_Report_FINAL-second-briefing.pdf?dm=1765449152)

2. For statistical purposes the UK is divided into 12 regions: 9 are in England (North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, East Midlands, West Midlands, East, London, South East, and South West) The other three regions are: Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/ukgeographies/eurostat> for more information.

The briefing provides recommendations for policy and practice, including targeted prevention efforts, improved cross-county coordination and victim support, and enhanced data collection and monitoring to inform future interventions and research.

## Introduction

Modern slavery remains a persistent challenge in the UK, with striking variation in how and where victims are identified, referred, and supported. This briefing explores the geographic and demographic dynamics of exploitation and referral within the UK's National Referral Mechanism (NRM) over the past decade to inform more effective responses. Drawing on the largest disaggregated NRM dataset at the time of the data analysis (data up to Q4, 2025). The briefing provides new insights into who is being referred, where exploitation is concentrated, and how referral patterns differ across the country.

The briefing provides a clear overview of key findings and trends, followed by a detailed analysis of regional differences and emerging risk factors. The first section examines changes in victim profiles and referral numbers over time, including shifts in gender, age, and nationality. Subsequent sections explore the main types of exploitation, identify county-level hotspots, and compare patterns between urban, rural, coastal, inland, border, and transport hub counties. Special attention is given to counties with the highest numbers of child victims, as well as female and male adult victims, and to the prevalence of county lines exploitation. Drawing on these findings, the brief concludes with evidence-based recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

# Methodology

## Data source

For this analysis, we used National Referral Mechanism (NRM) data, available upon request through the UK Data Service (UKDS) platform. The analysis uses two datasets from the UKDS. Data analysis for Q1 2014 – Q3 2024 uses the 14<sup>th</sup> edition of the dataset which comprises of 102,907 observations for referrals from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2014 – 30<sup>th</sup> September 2024.<sup>3</sup> The second dataset comprises 131,784 observations for referrals between 1<sup>st</sup> January 2014 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2025.<sup>4</sup> Both datasets include 87 variables covering demographic characteristics of victims or potential victims, types of exploitation, counties of exploitation, first responders, and case decision status.

The earlier dataset was the one available at the time that the analysis for this project began (the 15<sup>th</sup> edition was not published until March 2025). However, upon research validation activities prior to publication of the briefing it was requested that the latest available data was considered. The results of the analysis for the Q1 2014 – Q3 2024 period are based on the earlier dataset. The time series data on referrals through to the end of 2025 use the later dataset.

## Data processing

We began by cleaning and recoding variables to ensure standardisation and consistency. New variables of interest were created, such as whether victims were referred from the same county recorded as the location of exploitation, and the location of first responders. The dataset was also transformed to enable both county-level and individual-level analyses.

In the NRM dataset, locations of exploitation are recorded across 10 variables, allowing cases to capture multiple counties where victims may have been trafficked. However, when more than one county is recorded, it is not possible to precisely determine which was the most recent location of exploitation.

To analyse referral patterns, we created a proxy variable based on the geographic coverage of the referring entity, such as the police or other first responders.

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3. Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2024). *National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2024*. [data collection]. 14<sup>th</sup> Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-14>

4. Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2026). *National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2025*. [data collection]. 20<sup>th</sup> Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-20>

Where first responders' coverage was broad, we categorised them as 'national'. When this proxy coverage matched any of the listed locations of exploitation, the victim was assumed to have been referred from the same county of exploitation. Cases referred by entities categorised as national were treated separately, as victims may have been exploited in one county but referred by a branch of the entity operating elsewhere. If no match was found, the victim was assumed to have been referred from a different county than that of exploitation.

Regarding data completeness, the analysis focused on the main types of exploitation (i.e., criminal, labour, and sexual exploitation), where data availability was robust. Variables or categories with high levels of missing data or that were not central to the primary analysis were transformed or excluded as appropriate.

To better understand regional patterns and risk factors associated with trafficking, we grouped counties by geographic and demographic characteristics to reflect known differences in trafficking routes, detection, and service provision. Population sizes differ across clusters, and the available data reflect identification and referral practices rather than a random distribution of cases. Accordingly, referral shares are interpreted alongside population proportions and per capita rates to contextualise potential over- or under-representation.

1. Coastal or inland counties, based on access to the sea, as ports are recognised entry and transit points for trafficking.
2. Urban and rural counties reflect the influence of population density on potential differences in detection and service provision.
3. Major transportation hubs are defined as counties hosting key airports, seaports, or major rail hubs, given their role as points of entry and transit.
4. Border-region counties refer to those along internal UK borders (e.g., England-Scotland, England-Wales), where cross-jurisdictional coordination may influence detection and assistance efforts.
5. Counties with the ten highest numbers of female victims, male victims, and child victims at referral, highlighting areas with specific vulnerabilities and service needs.

While some counties may belong to more than one group, each cluster was defined based on characteristics relevant to the analysis. Using chi-square tests, we compared clusters to identify and interpret statistically significant differences in victim profiles and exploitation patterns. This approach allows for meaningful comparative insights, even where clusters are not mutually exclusive, and ensures robust results relevant to varying policy and research interests.<sup>5</sup>

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5. Pearson's chi-square tests were used to compare distributions of key categorical variables (e.g., gender, age group, nationality, type of exploitation, referral vs. exploitation county) across the defined clusters.

To explore correlations between caseload volumes and the share of negative decisions at the reasonable or conclusive grounds stage, we computed Pearson and Spearman tests. We did not find strong or statistically significant correlations, although these checks are descriptive and do not necessarily imply causation.

## Analytical methods

We employed descriptive statistics and comparative analysis, examining both victim- and county-level perspectives. To assess statistically significant differences between counties, we conducted chi-square tests for key victim characteristics and referral/exploitation rates. Results demonstrated strong statistical evidence of significant differences between counties for nearly all variables. These findings underscore substantial geographic variation in trafficking and referral patterns across the UK, supporting the need for local-level analysis and targeted interventions.

## Limitations

Despite the strengths of this analysis, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, changes in definitions, reporting practices, and local capacity over the study period may affect the comparability of data across years and counties. Second, missing or unknown data on exploitation type in a notable proportion of cases may obscure some trends. The accuracy of data on exploitation locations also needs to be analysed with caution, since victims may be unable to specify where they were exploited, particularly if they were moved frequently. These limitations are also tied to the limited availability of these data before the third quarter of 2021. Furthermore, clustering counties by shared characteristics introduces the risk of group heterogeneity, which could mask important local nuances. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the results and developing targeted interventions.<sup>6</sup>

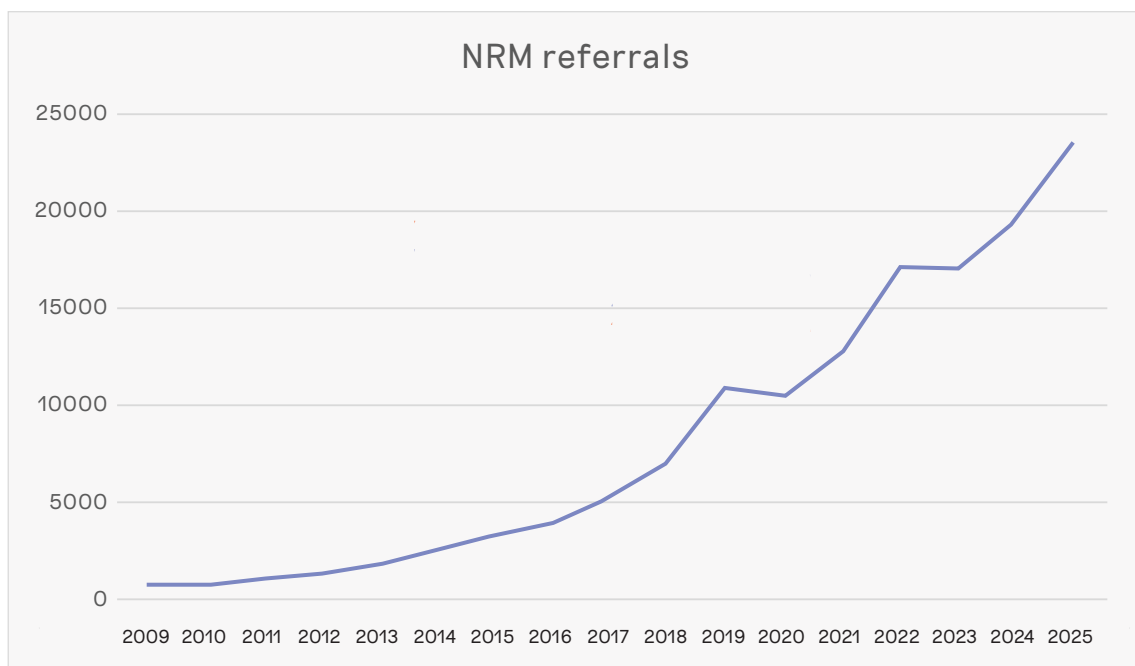
Finally, the briefing does not show changes in the locations of exploitation within the UK due to the smaller numbers of cases in annual periods. Data is presented based on the period between Q1 2014 and Q3 2024.

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6. UK Data Service. *National Referral Mechanism Data Notes*. Available at: [https://doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/8910/mrdoc/pdf/8910\\_ukds\\_data\\_notes.pdf](https://doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/8910/mrdoc/pdf/8910_ukds_data_notes.pdf)

# Victim profiles

There has been a continual upwards trend in referrals to the NRM since it was established on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009. Graph 1 shows that 2020 was the only year that the number of NRM referrals fell compared to the previous year. The 23,411 referrals in 2025 were an increase of 22% compared to 2024 (19,177).

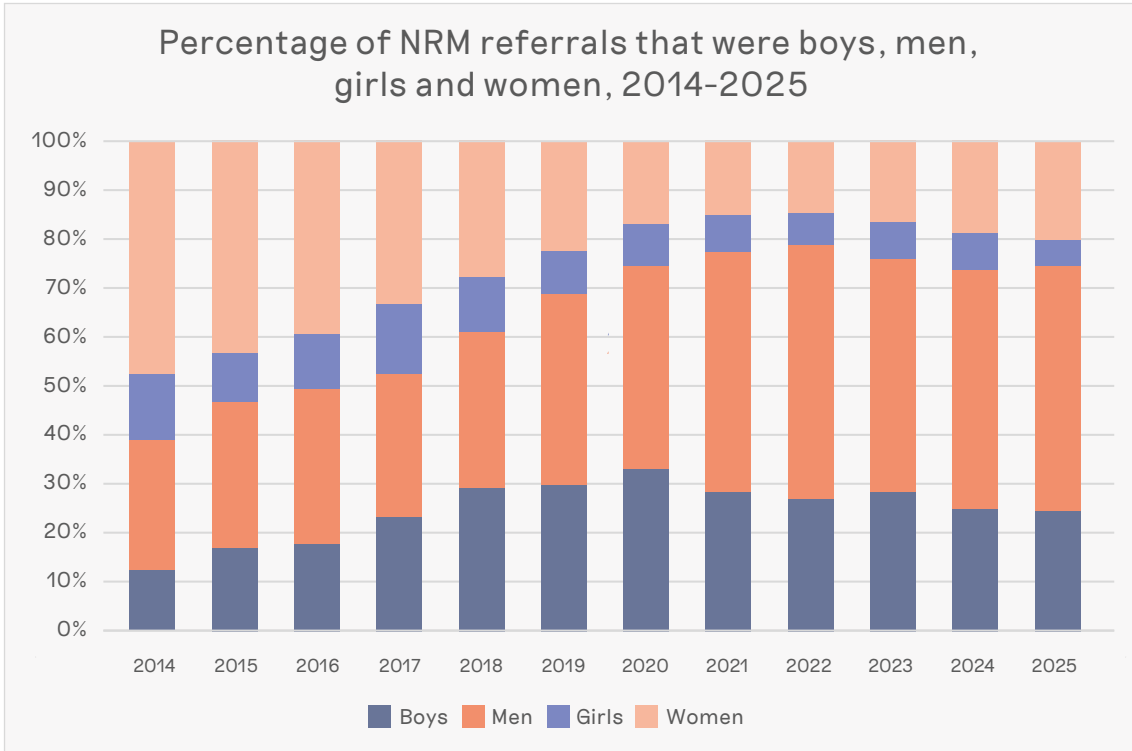


Graph 1: (Data source: UKDS NRM statistics 2014 - 2025)<sup>7</sup>

Graph 2 illustrates the changes in how many of the referrals are men, boys, women and girls. For the referrals in 2025, 50 per cent were men and another 24 per cent were boys; women and girls account for 20 and 6 per cent, respectively. The proportions of males among referred victims increased year-on-year between 2014-2022 recent years and in recent years males have represented three-quarters of all referrals. However, the proportions of referrals that are boys has remained lower than the peak of 33% in 2020. The high rates of referrals of males may reflect improved recognition of forms of exploitation that disproportionately affect male victims, such as county lines, it could also be influenced by operational priorities and broader system factors shaping referral pathways. That nearly three-quarters (74%) of referrals in 2025 were male given the high percentage of referrals that are female in other jurisdictions. For example, nearly two-thirds of registered victims of human trafficking in Europe

7. Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2026). National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2025. [data collection]. 20th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-20>

in 2024 were female (63%).<sup>8</sup> However, Graph 2 illustrates that the high rates of male referrals in the UK compared to other European countries is not a recent phenomenon, as long ago as 2016 men and boys represented almost half (49%) of all UK NRM referrals.



Graph 2: (Data source: UKDS NRM statistics 2014 - 2025)<sup>9</sup>

Over time, the proportion of women in the caseload has declined. The percentage of women referred in 2025 (20%) is half the figure for referrals each year between 2014-2016. However, the percentage of NRM referrals that are women has been increasing since a record low of 15% in 2022. While men initially represented half the number of women, they now outnumber them two to one. Similarly, in the early years of the dataset, boys and girls were referred at similar rates, but in 2025 boys were referred approximately four times more often than girls.

The data suggest that some victims may have remained in exploitation until adulthood, particularly male victims. While 38 per cent of identified victims were adult men at the time of exploitation, this figure increased to 50 per cent at referral. Similarly, the share of women rose from 15 to 20 per cent. This may indicate delays in identification and assistance, particularly for male victims. However, such cases may also include people who were exploited during childhood and

8. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Trafficking\\_in\\_human\\_beings\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Trafficking_in_human_beings_statistics)

9. Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2026). National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2025. [data collection]. 20th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-20>

adulthood, e.g. 17-18 or 16-23. While NRM data is available on the age of referrals at the time of exploitation and data on the age at the time of referral, the data on age at exploitation is recorded exclusively as either 'child', 'adult' or 'unknown'.

## Recommendations

- Research could be commissioned to better understand the factors for gendered patterns of referrals to the UK NRM.
- The Home Office should consider collecting and publishing data on NRM referrals in a way that can show referrals which experienced exploitation both as a child and as an adult. It should also consider providing more granular data on the age of exploitation (as it does for age at referral). The availability of such data would help improve understanding about delays between exploitation and referral. It would also provide more detailed demographic profiles of referrals that could support improvements to identifying potential victims and the prevention of trafficking.

In 2015, six per cent of NRM referrals were UK nationals, and the vast majority were foreign nationals. Ten years later, the caseload of UK Nationals has increased to 22 per cent of all referrals, while foreign nationals account for the remaining 78 per cent. UK nationals referred to the NRM in 2025 were most frequently children (59% boys, 16% girls, 18% men, 7% women), while most foreign nationals are adults (46% men, 18% women, 11% boys, 2% girls).

In 2025 the most frequently referred foreign nationals were Eritrean (13%), Vietnamese (9%), Albanian (8%), Somali (7%), Sudanese (7%), and Ethiopian (7%). While only three nationalities (UK, Albanian, Vietnamese) among the ten most frequently referred in 2014 were among the ten most referred in 2025, and the number of European nationalities has reduced from a high of six (plus UK) in 2014 to only one (plus UK) in 2025 many nationalities have been consistently prominent. Only twenty nationalities have featured among the ten most frequently referred per year between 2014-2025.

## 10 most frequently referred nationalities to the NRM each year between 2014-2025

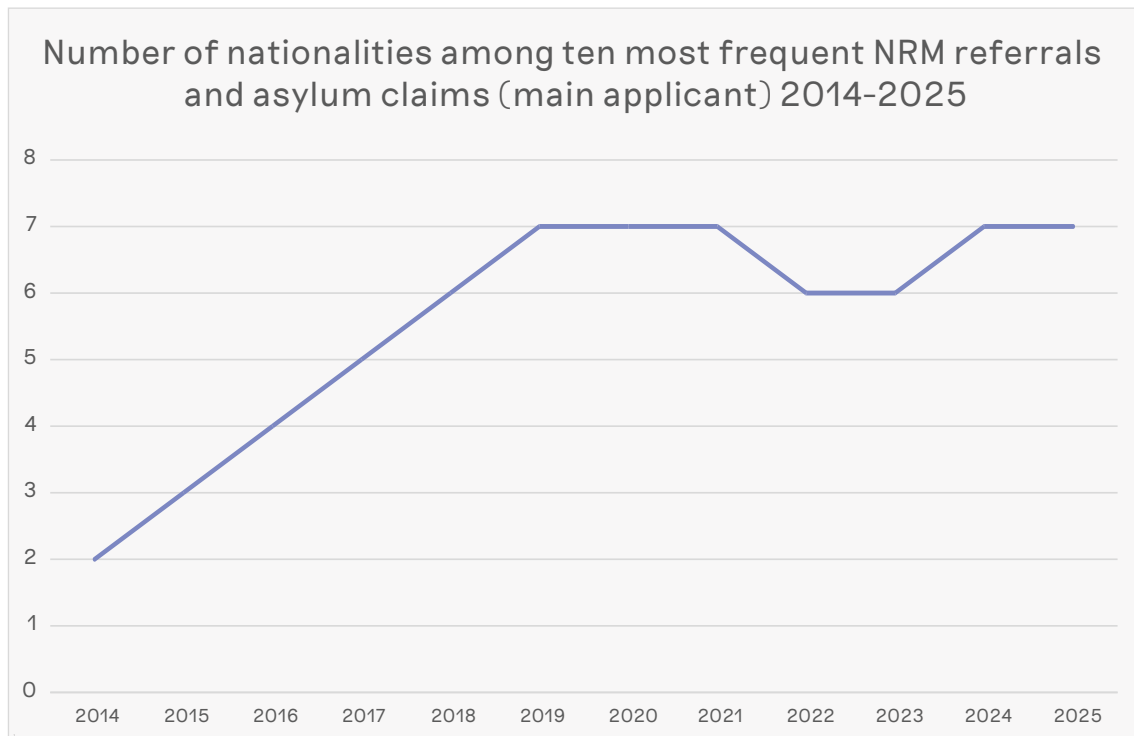
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
1st	Albanian	Albanian	Albanian	UK	UK	UK
2nd	Nigerian	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Albanian	Albanian	Albanian
3rd	Vietnamese	Nigerian	UK	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Vietnamese
4th	Romanian	Romanian	Nigerian	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese
5th	Slovak	UK	Chinese	Nigerian	Romanian	Indian
6th	UK	Polish	Romanian	Romanian	Sudanese	Eritrean
7th	Chinese	Eritrean	Polish	Sudanese	Eritrean	Sudanese
8th	Polish	Chinese	Eritrean	Eritrean	Nigerian	Romanian
9th	Lithuanian	Slovak	Indian	Indian	Indian	Nigerian
10th	Hungarian	Sudanese	Afghan	Polish	Pakistani	Pakistani

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
1st	UK	UK	Albanian	UK	UK	UK
2nd	Albanian	Albanian	UK	Albanian	Albanian	Eritrean
3rd	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Eritrean	Vietnamese	Vietnamese	Vietnamese
4th	Sudanese	Eritrean	Sudanese	Sudanese	Eritrean	Albanian
5th	Romanian	Sudanese	Vietnamese	Eritrean	Sudanese	Somali
6th	Eritrean	Iranian	Iranian	Indian	Indian	Sudanese
7th	Chinese	Romanian	Somali	Iranian	Iranian	Ethiopian
8th	Iranian	Iraqi	Indian	Afghan	Somali	Indian
9th	Indian	Afghan	Afghan	Romanian	Afghan	Afghan
10th	Iraqi	Chinese	Romanian	Chinese	Syrian	Iranian

Table 1: (Data source: UKDS NRM statistics 2014 – 2025)<sup>10</sup>

10. Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2026). National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2025. [data collection]. 20th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-20>



**Graph 3: (Data sources: UKDS NRM statistics 2014 – 2025<sup>11</sup> and Asylum claims and initial decisions detailed datasets, year ending December 2025)<sup>12</sup>**

As the most frequent nationalities among NRM referrals have changed over recent years there has been increasing cross-over between nationalities represented among asylum applications and NRM referrals. Graph 3 shows the number of nationalities that were among the ten most frequent NRM referrals and ten most frequent nationalities for asylum applications. In recent years there has been significant overlap, with seven nationalities represented in both categories.<sup>13</sup>

A comparison between the NRM caseload and UK foreign-born population data<sup>14</sup> highlights three distinct scenarios in how diaspora size relates to trafficking referrals.<sup>15</sup> High referral numbers are sometimes recorded despite relatively small diaspora communities. Albanians and Vietnamese together account for 17 per cent of all referrals, yet neither group appears among the UK’s largest foreign-

11. Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2026). National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2025. [data collection]. 20th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-20>

12. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69958f76b33a4db7ff889d43/asylum-claims-datasets-dec-2025.xlsx>

13. In 2025 these nationalities were: Afghan, Eritrean, Indian, Iranian, Somali, Sudanese, and Vietnamese.

14. Office for National Statistics (ONS). *Population of the United Kingdom by Country of Birth and Nationality (Discontinued after June 2021)*. Dataset available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationality>

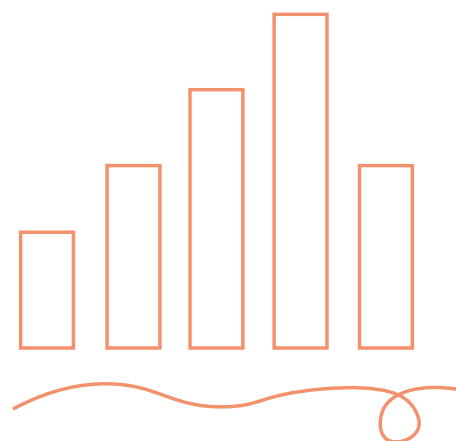
15. For the purposes of this analysis, diaspora size is proxied using foreign-born population estimates. This measure captures first-generation migrants only and does not include UK-born descendants of migrant communities. As such, diaspora size estimates should be interpreted as indicative of first-generation presence rather than total community size.

born populations.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Eritreans and Sudanese together account for 20 per cent of the 2025 NRM caseload despite communities of around 30 to 40 thousand people in the UK in 2021.<sup>17</sup>

The prominence of these communities in referrals may reflect factors beyond community size, including exposure to conflict, vulnerability linked to migration pathways, the activities of organised trafficking networks, and potentially the operational focus of law enforcement and immigration authorities. In some contexts, targeted investigations or the identification of specific networks may also generate cumulative effects, increasing the detection of victims from particular nationalities. These potential explanations warrant further empirical research.

In other cases, large diaspora communities are linked to relatively few referrals. India, Pakistan, and Poland are the three largest foreign-born groups in the UK (896, 456, and 682 thousand people in 2021, respectively), but together they account for less than five per cent of NRM referrals. This may indicate genuinely lower prevalence of trafficking, possibly linked to more established support networks, but it could also suggest under-identification of victims within larger communities, where exploitation may be more hidden.

A third pattern shows partial overlap. Countries such as Romania, Nigeria, China, Somalia are prominently among the UK's foreign-born population and in the NRM caseload. Together, these scenarios suggest that diaspora size alone does not explain trafficking risks and that patterns of exploitation and referral are more closely tied to vulnerability factors outside population structures, like geopolitical context, organised crime, and detection practices.



16. Albania and Vietnam do not feature in the sixty most common countries of birth for the overseas born population in the UK based on data collection for the 2021 census. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationality>

17. See Table 1.3 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/populationoftheunitedkingdombycountryofbirthandnationality/july2020tojune2021/populationbycountryofbirthandnationalityjul20tojun21.xls>

## Geographic analysis of exploitation

The most frequently recorded types of exploitation in 2025 were labour (36%), criminal (23%), not specified or unknown (12%), and sexual (9%). This is followed by cases recorded as multiple exploitation types, e.g. labour and criminal made up of 6% of referrals. Boys and men were significantly more frequently exploited in criminal activities when compared to girls and women. This pattern is also present among victims of labour exploitation. On the other hand, women and girls are most frequently trafficked for exploitation in domestic work and sexual exploitation.

Similarly, 56 per cent of UK nationals are exploited in criminal activities. In contrast, foreign nationals account for the vast majority of victims trafficked for domestic work (96%), labour (88%), and sexual exploitation (76%).

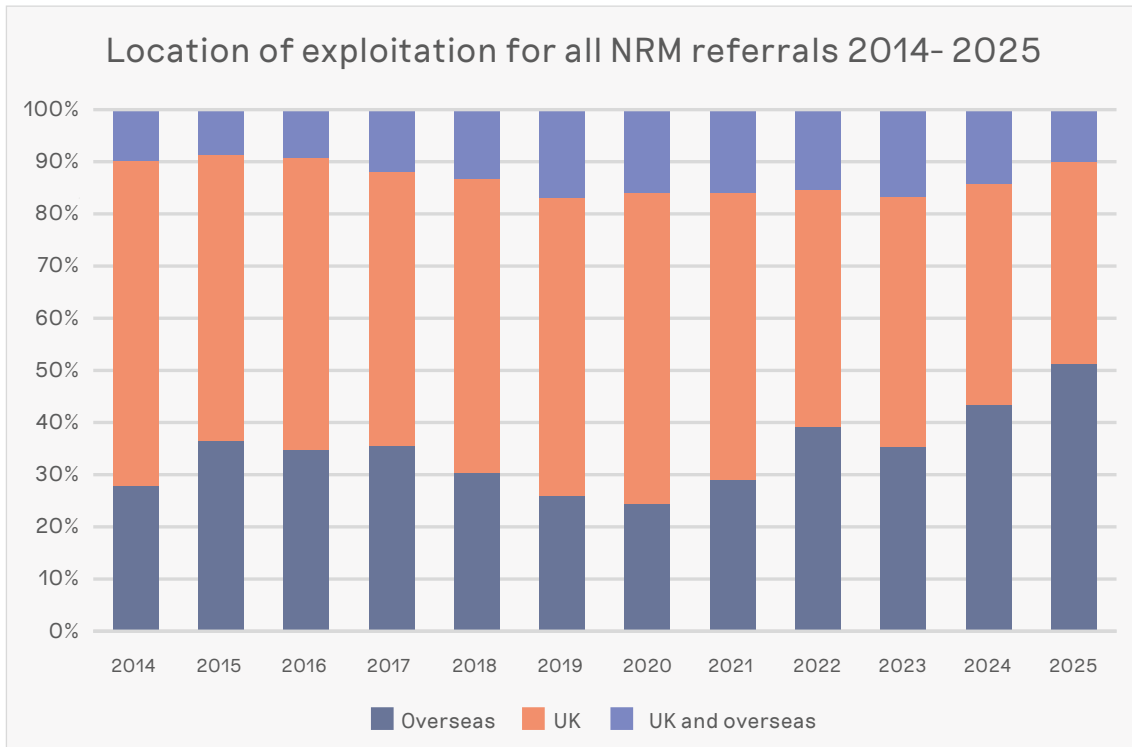
Across all NRM decisions between the first quarter of 2014 and the third quarter of 2024 foreign nationals are twice as likely to receive a negative Conclusive Grounds decision (16%) and more than three times as likely to receive a negative Reasonable Grounds decision (26%), as opposed to eight per cent among UK nationals. The disparity between UK and foreign nationals is more pronounced at the Conclusive Grounds stage.

We calculated correlation coefficients using Pearson's and Spearman's tests to identify if the volume of referrals was associated with the outcomes. We did not identify a strong or significant correlation between the two variables, which means that differences in decision outcomes for foreign nationals and UK nationals are unlikely to be explained by referral volumes alone.<sup>18</sup>

According to the data, half of referrals in 2025 reported being exploited exclusively outside of the UK (51 per cent), 39 per cent reported being exploited exclusively in the UK, and the remainder (10%) in both the UK and overseas. The long-term caseload of NRM referrals between Q1 2014 and Q3 2024 shows that 52 per cent of referrals reported they were exploited only in the UK, 34 per cent overseas, and the remainder (14%) in both the UK and overseas.

Graph 4 shows that the percentage of referrals reporting exploitation exclusively outside of the UK has been on an upward trend since 2020.

18. For further information, see *Seeing beyond the negative: An examination of key variables in the different reasons for the decisions not to formally recognise people as survivors of modern slavery*, available at: [https://files.modernslaverypec.org/production/assets/downloads/MSPEC\\_IOM\\_report\\_FINAL-full-report.pdf?dm=1762445798](https://files.modernslaverypec.org/production/assets/downloads/MSPEC_IOM_report_FINAL-full-report.pdf?dm=1762445798)

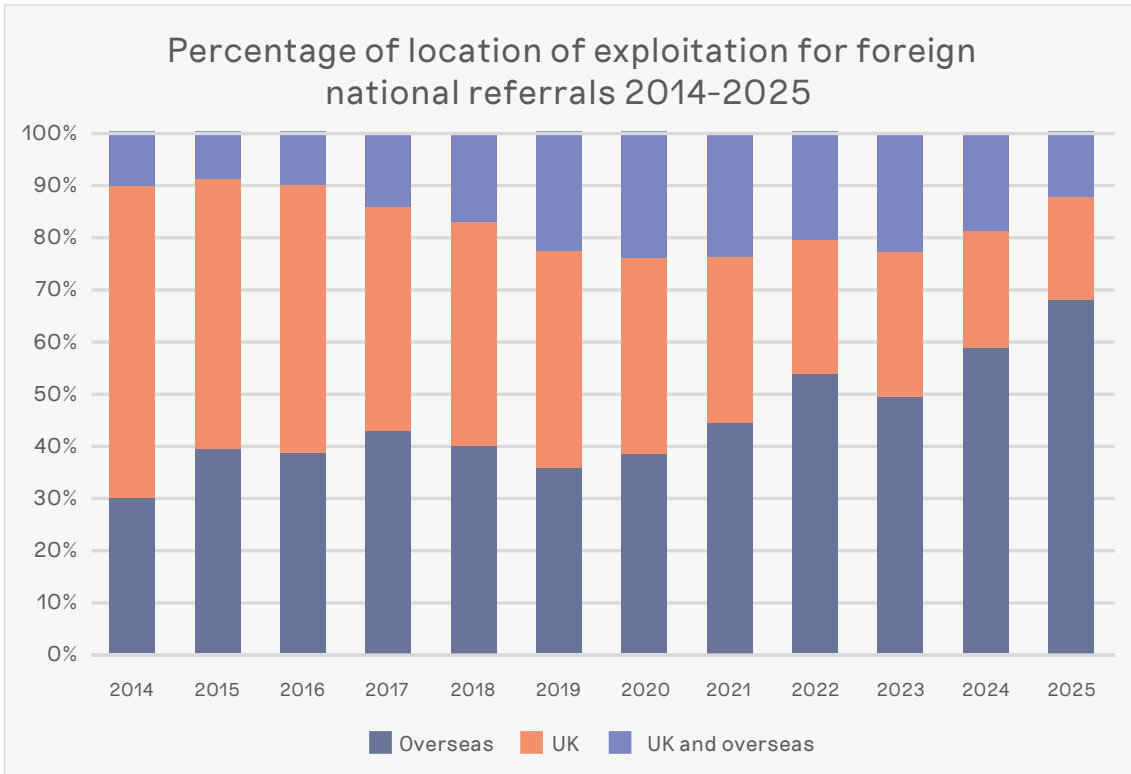


Graph 4: (Data source: UKDS NRM statistics 2014 - 2025)<sup>19</sup>

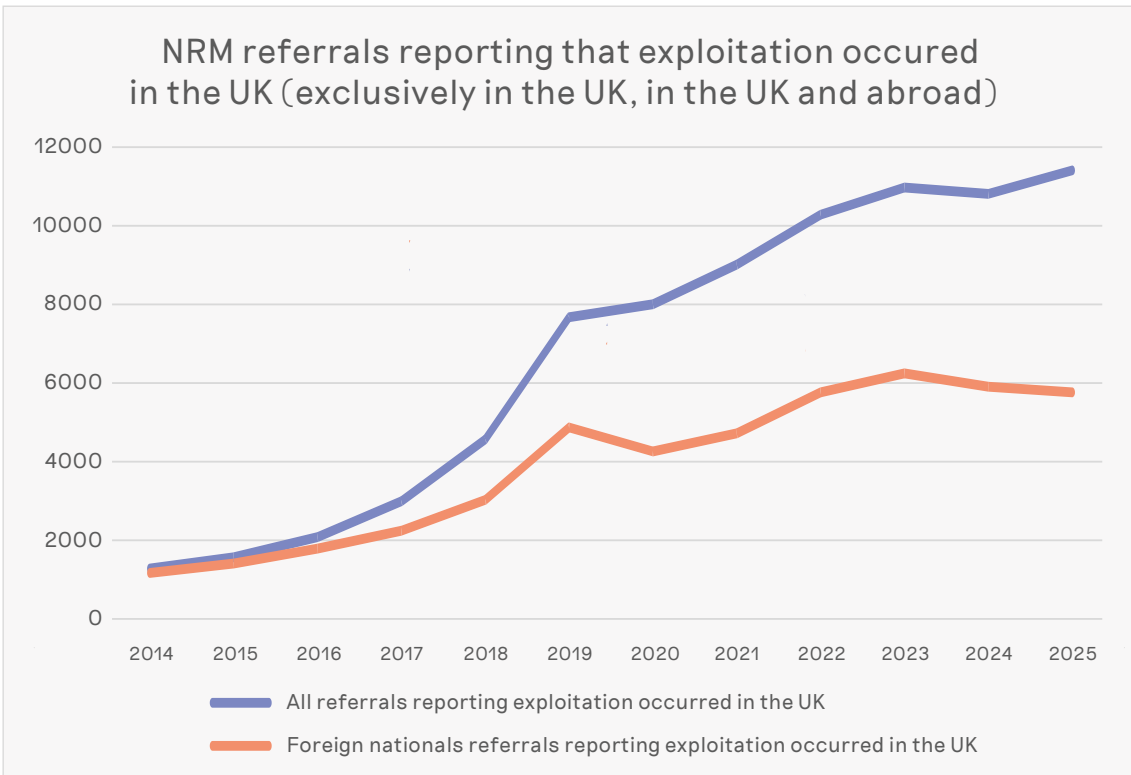
However, the large numbers of UK nationals referred to the NRM has an impact on the data for the location of exploitation; UK was the most frequently referred nationality in 8 of the last 12 years (see Table 1). Almost all UK nationals referred during this time were exploited in the UK, only 1% reported being exploited outside of the UK.

Graph 5 shows a trend of a falling percentage of foreign nationals referred to the NRM who reported being exploited in the UK over recent years. In 2025 only 33% of foreign nationals reported exploitation having occurred in the UK. This is approximately half the percentage of foreign nationals referred between 2014-2020 reporting exploitation having occurred in the UK.

19. Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2026). National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2025. [data collection]. 20th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-20>



Graph 5: (Data source: UKDS NRM statistics 2014 - 2025)<sup>20</sup>



Graph 6: (Data source: UKDS NRM statistics 2014 - 2025)<sup>21</sup>

20. Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2026). National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2025. [data collection]. 20th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-20>

21. Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2026). National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2025. [data collection]. 20th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-20>

Considering nationality and location of exploitation combined over the long-term period also highlights the extent of the recent changes in nationalities and locations of exploitation. Table 2) shows 35 per cent of NRM referrals between Q1 2014 – Q3 2024 were foreign national referrals reporting they were exploited only in the UK, and 25 per cent are UK nationals exploited only in the UK. A further 18 per cent are foreign nationals exploited outside their country of origin (excluding the UK), and 11 per cent are foreign nationals exploited in their country of origin.<sup>22</sup>

### NRM referrals per combinations of nationality and location of exploitation

Nationality and location of exploitation	Freq.	Percent
Foreign national exploited only in the UK	34,230	35%
British national exploited in the UK	24,761	25%
Foreign national exploited outside country of origin (excluding the UK)	17,388	18%
Foreign national exploited in country of origin	10,410	11%
Foreign national exploited within and outside country of origin (excluding the UK)	4,810	5%
Foreign national exploited outside country of origin (including the UK)	3,809	4%
Foreign national exploited within and outside country of origin (including the UK)	2,686	3%
British national exploited within and outside the UK	154	0%
British national exploited outside the UK	38	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>98,286</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Note:** Figures are calculated based on available data on both nationality and location of exploitation.

**Table 2:** (Data source: UKDS NRM statistics 2014-2024)<sup>23</sup>

The location of exploitation is irrelevant to whether should be referred to the NRM and recognised as a victim of modern slavery by the Home Office. Section 14.38 of the Modern Slavery Act Statutory Guidance (Statutory Guidance) explains,

22. Victims exploited overseas may still be referred to and protected through the UK NRM. The statutory guidance for the Modern Slavery Act states: "While a victim must be physically in the UK in order to receive NRM-related protection and assistance, the fact that a victim has been exploited outside of the UK does not preclude the decision maker from making a determination." Home Office. *Modern Slavery: Statutory Guidance for England and Wales (under s49 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015) and Non-statutory Guidance for Scotland and Northern Ireland*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/modern-slavery-how-to-identify-and-support-victims/modern-slavery-statutory-guidance-for-england-and-wales-under-s49-of-the-modern-slavery-act-2015-and-non-statutory-guidance-for-scotland-and-northe>

23. Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2024). National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2024. [data collection]. 14th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-14>

*“While a victim must be physically in the UK in order to receive NRM related protection and assistance, the fact that a victim has been exploited outside of the UK does not preclude the decision maker from making a determination.”<sup>24</sup>*

Regardless of where the exploitation has occurred, individuals should still be able enter the NRM in order to access specialist support and assistance given the harms and impacts of their experiences. Section 14.40 explains,

*“Although they may be far removed from their situation of modern slavery, they may still have been subjected to exploitation and may therefore be considered a victim of modern slavery. They may also still be traumatised by their experience even in historic cases.”*

This guidance is consistent with the UK’s obligations under Article 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights to identify and protect potential victims of human trafficking who are within its territory.

Section 14.39 of the Statutory Guidance, recognises that individuals referred reporting exploitation outside of the UK should “be assessed on the same basis as a person who states they have been a victim of modern slavery in the UK.” However, the Statutory Guidance does not expand on how decision makers should practically gather or assess information for people exploited outside of the UK to determine whether the case meets the definition of modern slavery. While decisions are made on the “same basis” for people exploited in London or Libya the evidence available and the ability to gather evidence will be markedly different.

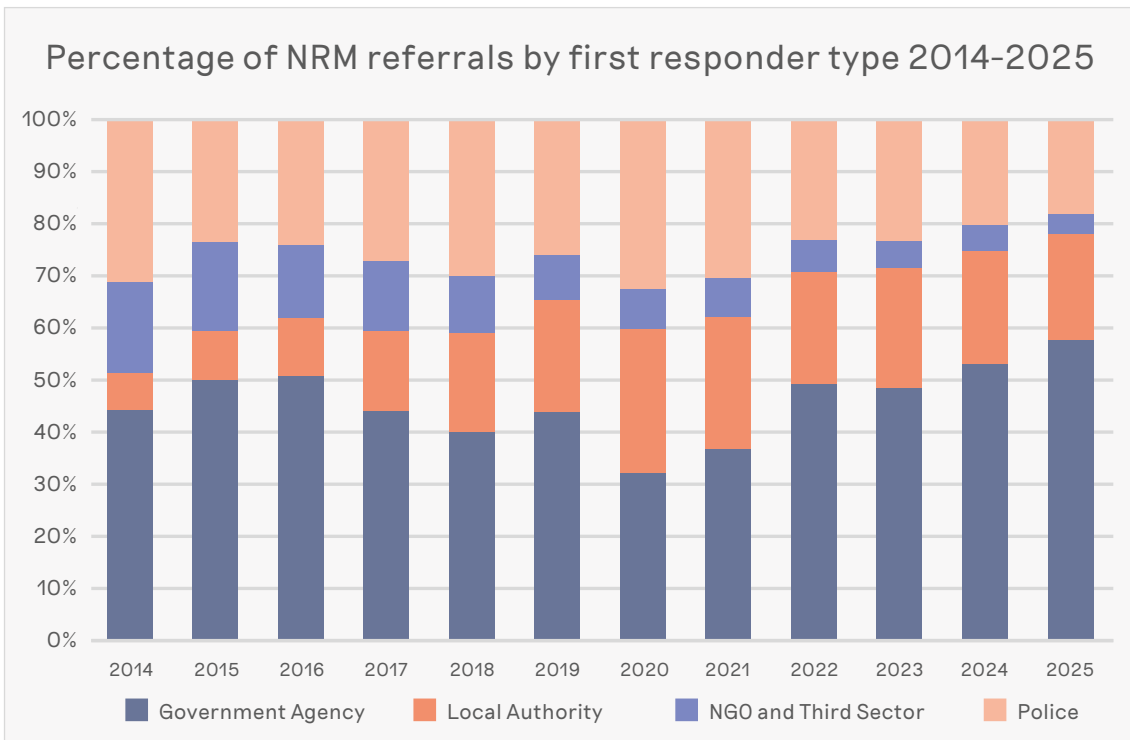
## Recommendation

- The Home Office should consider introducing further guidance for decision makers on gathering and assessing information on cases reporting exploitation exclusively outside of the UK.

There are four types of first responder organisations (FROs); government agencies, police, local authorities and NGOs and third sector organisations. Graph 7 shows that in 2025 there was a record high percentage of referrals by

24. Please see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/modern-slavery-how-to-identify-and-support-victims/modern-slavery-statutory-guidance-for-england-and-wales-under-s49-of-the-modern-slavery-act-2015-and-non-statutory-guidance-for-scotland-and-northe>

government agencies (58%), whereas the percentage of referrals by the police and NGOs and third sector organisations were the lowest on record, 18 per cent and 4 per cent respectively. However, this overall distribution masks important variation by exploitation type and geography.



Graph 7: (Data source: UKDS NRM statistics 2014-2025) <sup>25</sup>

Disaggregation by exploitation type and referral location reveals distinct patterns. In referrals in 2025 recorded exclusively as criminal exploitation, police and local authorities account for a larger share of referrals (40% and 46%, respectively), highlighting the prominent role of statutory safeguarding actors in these cases. By contrast, referrals recorded exclusively as domestic, labour, and sexual exploitation were more frequently referred by government agencies (58%, 85%, and 56%, respectively), indicating that identification pathways differ across exploitation types.

The data for 2025 shows both similarities and differences with the findings of the data analysis for Q1 2014-23 2024. Similarities between the extended period and the latest data are for referrals of criminal exploitation, where police and local authorities account for a larger share of referrals (41% and 35%, respectively). Similarly, referrals for domestic and sexual exploitation were most frequently referred by government agencies (48% and 49% respectively) Referrals of labour

25. Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2026). National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2025. [data collection]. 20th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-20>

exploitation were most frequently made by government agencies (56%) but this is much lower compared to the most recent data. This may be impacted by a dramatic increase in referrals by Border Force (one of the government agencies) who made a record 3947 referrals in 2025, more than the total of their referrals for 2014-2024. The vast majority of referrals by Border Force were recorded as labour exploitation.

The type of first responders also varies geographically. Among victims referred from the same county where exploitation occurred, 44 per cent were identified by police and 33 per cent by local authorities. In contrast, 57 per cent of cases referred from counties other than the location of exploitation were identified by government agencies, indicating that cross-county referrals may be driven more by administrative or regulatory mechanisms than by immediate law enforcement detection.

## Recommendation

- Further research and analysis is needed to better understand how institutional mandates and operational practices shape referral pathways across exploitation types and locations.

## High-risk areas: Identifying hotspots and sectors prone to exploitation

The main counties of exploitation for the longer-term period of Q1 2014 – Q3 2024 include Greater London (26%), West Midlands (9%), Greater Manchester (6%), West Yorkshire (4%), Essex, and Merseyside (3% in each case). Altogether, these six counties represent about 51 per cent of the caseload. In total there were 62 counties of exploitation with at least 10 referred victims, although individually, they account for two per cent of cases or less.

The main counties of exploitation in 2025 are the same with almost identical proportions (Greater London 27%, West Midlands 8%, Greater Manchester 5%, West Yorkshire 5%, Merseyside 3% and Essex 2%).

When comparing the number of victims per type of exploitation with the total referred from each county for the long-term period of Q1 2014 – Q3 2024, we note that in some locations, a very high proportion of referrals are criminal exploitation. For example, in Essex, criminal exploitation accounts for 75 per cent of all referrals; in East Sussex, 72 per cent; and in Merseyside, 71 per cent. Meanwhile, 10 per cent of cases of exploitation in domestic work are focused on Greater London, perhaps reflecting the concentration of households employing domestic staff in London. Similarly, West Yorkshire and Buckinghamshire account

for nine and eight per cent of victims exploited in domestic work, respectively. The highest proportions of victims of labour exploitation are observed in Lanarkshire (43%), South Yorkshire (41%), and Leicestershire (40%), with the latter linked to long-documented cases of exploitation in the textiles and garment sector.<sup>26</sup> Finally, sexually exploited victims are more frequently found in Lanarkshire, Greater Manchester, and the West Midlands, accounting for 23, 21 and 20 per cent of cases, respectively. Other variables like gender and age at exploitation or referral do not seem to differ from the pattern described by the general data when being disaggregated by county of exploitation.

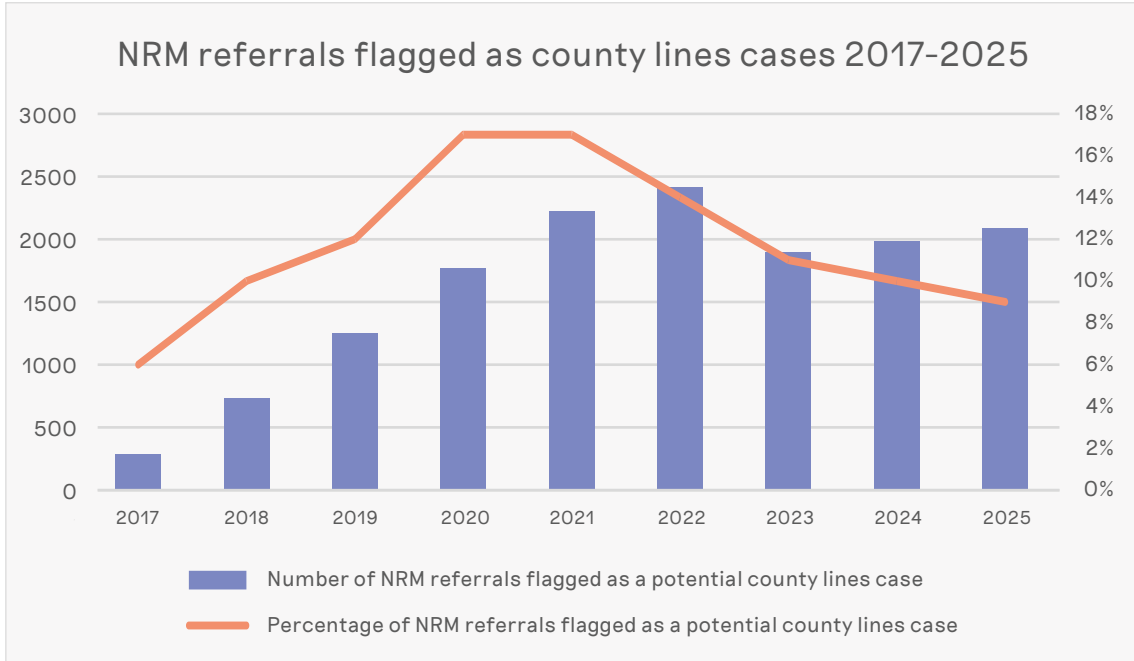
## County lines and exploitation

In 2025, 9 per cent of all referrals were flagged as a potential 'county lines' case. County lines is the involvement of "county lines" or gangs and organised criminal networks dedicated to transporting illegal drugs within the UK.<sup>27</sup> Graph 8 shows that this was the lowest percentage since 2017 (6%) when data on county lines cases was first collected. This is down from highs of 17 per cent of all referrals being flagged as such a case in both 2020 and 2021. Graph 9 shows that most of these cases are boys followed by men. In 2025 a record high of 93% of these cases involved males. Looking at nationality, county lines were recorded in 32 per cent of UK nationals and 31 per cent of dual UK nationals compared to just 1 per cent of cases involving UK nationals compared to only two per cent of cases involving foreign nationals.

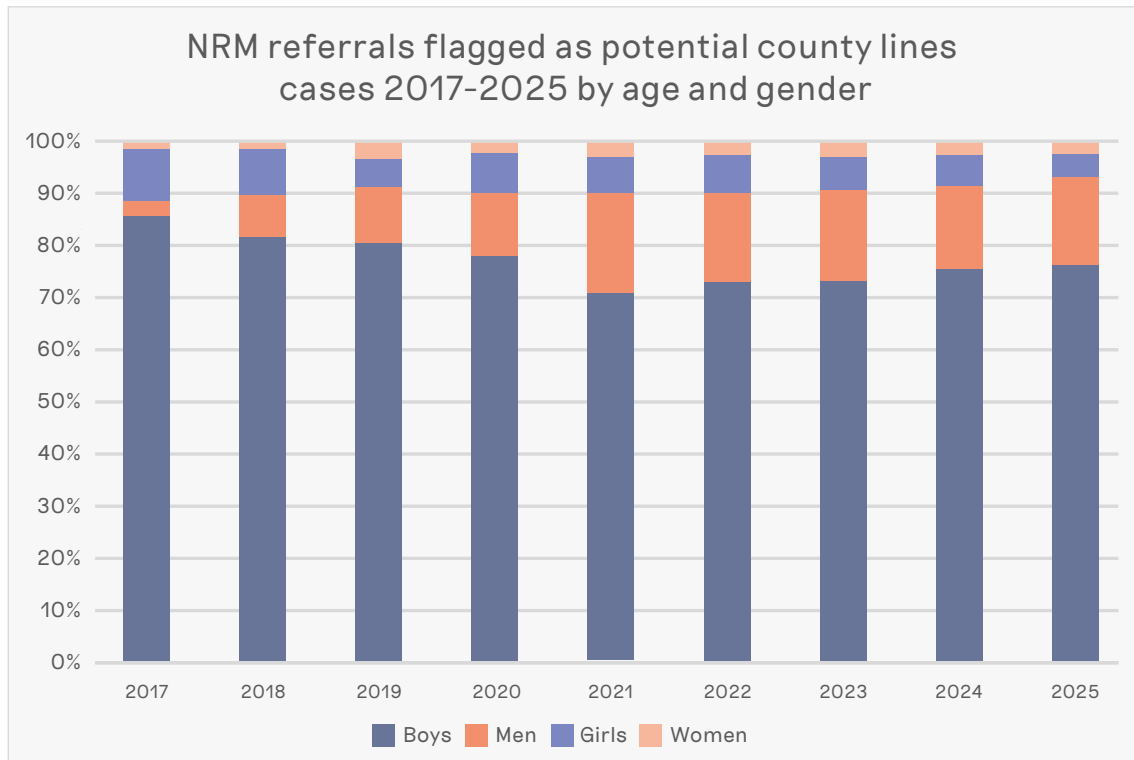
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26. The Guardian. "She agreed to work for £5 an hour: the desperate plight of many Leicester garment workers". Published 14 January 2024. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2024/jan/14/she-agreed-to-work-for-5-an-hour-the-desperate-plight-of-many-leicester-garment-workers>

27. National Crime Agency (NCA). *County Lines*. Available at: <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/drug-trafficking/county-lines>



Graph 8: (Data source: UKDS NRM statistics 2014 - 2025)



Graph 9: (Data source: UKDS NRM statistics 2014 - 2025)<sup>28</sup>

28. Home Office, Modern Slavery Research & Analysis. (2026). National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, 2014-2025. [data collection]. 20th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8910, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8910-20>

## Referral vs. exploitation locations: Discrepancies between where victims are referred from and where they were exploited

When comparing the location of exploitation and the coverage of first responders and involved police forces, the data suggest that victims are slightly more frequently referred in the counties where they were exploited, accounting for 49 per cent of the caseload. Another 41 per cent were referred from a county different from the one where exploitation took place, and the remainder (10%) were likely to be referred from the same county of exploitation if the first responder had national coverage.<sup>29</sup>

Over time, the proportion of victims referred from the same county where exploitation occurred has increased. This trend may be partly linked to the rising share of British nationals among referrals, who are more often referred locally. However, further analysis would be required to assess the extent to which nationality explains this pattern.

Similar distinctions are observed by age and gender: while adult victims (23% women, 46% men) are more frequently referred from a different county of exploitation, children (10% girls, 36% boys) are referred from the same county where exploitation took place.

About 50 per cent of victims of domestic work, 62 per cent of victims of labour exploitation, and 60 per cent of sexually exploited victims were referred from a different county than the one in which exploitation took place. By contrast, 61 per cent of victims of criminal exploitation are referred from the same county where exploitation occurred. This pattern likely reflects differences in identification practices rather than reduced victim mobility. Cases involving criminal exploitation are frequently detected by law enforcement at the point of exploitation, resulting in referral from the same county. This is consistent with the finding that 63 per cent of county line cases were referred from the county where exploitation occurred. Victims of trafficking who are exploited to commit crimes may have additional barriers to reaching out to first responders to disclose their experiences than victims exploited for the purposes of sexual and labour exploitation. Victims of trafficking for criminal exploitation may also be more likely to be encountered while they are active in the purpose of their exploitation (e.g. selling drugs) than victims of other types of exploitation. Meanwhile, domestic work, labour, and sexual exploitation could involve a higher degree of victim mobility, either forced by traffickers or by their escape and further request for assistance elsewhere.

29. See *Data processing* in the Methodology section for details on how referrals by entities with national coverage were categorised.

## Recommendation

Further analysis is required to better understand the factors that may help to explain the reasons that the locations of referral and exploitation do and do not align.

### County-level analysis: Variation in referrals by population size and police force coverage

When comparing the number of victims with the latest available figures of the population of each county of exploitation, the data suggest that there are around two victims of trafficking per thousand inhabitants in Midlothian, the West Midlands, Greater London, and Bristol (Table 3).<sup>30</sup> Similarly, on average, there is at least one victim per thousand inhabitants among the recorded counties of exploitation.

#### Counties with the highest number of victims per thousand inhabitants<sup>31</sup>

County	Victims
Midlothian	3
West Midlands	2
Greater London	
Bristol	
Greater Manchester	1
West Yorkshire	
Essex	

Table 3: (Data source: Office for National Statistics. Population Estimates)<sup>32</sup>

30. Office for National Statistics (ONS). *Population Estimates*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates>

31. These figures should be interpreted with caution, as counties with smaller police forces may display higher per-officer rates due to the size of the denominator rather than exceptionally high referral volumes. The rates reflect the situation at the time of data extraction and are intended to provide a snapshot of relative pressure on police capacity rather than a longitudinal assessment of trends.

32. Office for National Statistics (ONS). *Population Estimates*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates>

When comparing the number of NRM referrals in 2023 with police force coverage, we found that the police force area with the highest ratio of referrals per thousand police officers was Lincolnshire with a rate of 133. This was nearly double the figure of 68 for Merseyside.<sup>33</sup>

There are 43 regional police forces in England and Wales whereas Scotland and Northern Ireland have territorial police forces covering the whole country (Police Scotland and the Police Service of Northern Ireland) The ratios of referrals in 2023 per thousand police for Scotland was 23 and for Northern Ireland it was 10.

## Evaluating geographic and demographic risk factors with county clustering

### Coastal vs. inland counties

For the Q1 2014 – Q3 2024 period, most referrals come from inland counties, while coastal counties, accounting for 10,021 cases, represent only 19 per cent of the caseload despite representing 28 per cent of the UK population, suggesting a lower concentration of identified cases relative to population size.<sup>34</sup> The average ratio of victims per 10 thousand inhabitants in inland counties is nearly twice that of coastal counties (9 vs. 5 per 10,000, respectively). Victims referred from coastal counties are predominantly British (61%), with the remainder being foreign nationals. In contrast, victims referred from inland counties are almost equally likely to be British or foreign. Additionally, the share (75%) of victims referred from the same county is slightly higher in inland areas compared to coastal counties (71%).

At the time of exploitation, most victims in coastal counties were boys (47%) or men (28%), followed by girls (12%) and women (10%). Notably, around five per cent of trafficked boys and one per cent of girls became adults by the time they were referred. These patterns are also reflected among victims referred from inland counties.

The most frequent types of exploitation in coastal counties include criminal, labour, and sexual exploitation, accounting for 67, 32, and 14 per cent of all cases. County lines were involved in 34 per cent of cases. Inland counties, on the other hand, show slightly higher rates of labour (35%) and sexual exploitation (17%),

33. The ten highest ratios by police force area were Lincolnshire, Bedfordshire, West Midlands, North Yorkshire, Cambridgeshire, West Yorkshire, Leicestershire, Greater Manchester, Greater London and Northamptonshire.

34. Coastal counties include Aberdeenshire, Angus, Argyll and Bute, Ayrshire and Arran, Banffshire, Bristol, Caithness, Cornwall, Cumbria, Devon, Dorset, Dumfries and Galloway, East Sussex, Fife, Gloucestershire, Highland, Isle of Wight, Kent, Lancashire, Lincolnshire, Merseyside, Moray, Norfolk, Northumberland, Renfrewshire, Ross and Cromarty, Somerset, Suffolk, Tyne & Wear, West Sussex

while the incidence of criminal exploitation and county lines involvement is lower: 59 and 24 per cent of the caseload, respectively.

## Proportion of urban vs. rural areas

Urban counties account for 27,873 cases or 52 per cent of all referrals while representing approximately 32 per cent of the UK population. This indicates a disproportionate concentration of identified cases in urban areas, where the average ratio is 13 victims per 10,000 inhabitants, compared to six per 10,000 in rural counties.

Victims referred from urban counties are predominantly foreign nationals (56%), whereas those referred from rural areas are mostly British (61%). In absolute terms, this means that foreign nationals account for a larger share of victims in urban counties than in rural ones. However, when compared against resident population structures, foreign nationals are markedly overrepresented in both settings. They constitute 22 per cent of the urban population but 56 per cent of victims, and nine per cent of the rural population but 39 per cent of victims. This overrepresentation is therefore stronger in rural counties, where foreign nationals are over four times more prevalent among victims than in the general population, compared to two and a half times in urban areas.<sup>35</sup>

In terms of age and gender at referral, rural areas report a higher proportion of boys (44% contrasted with 33% in urban areas) and slightly more girls (12% versus 11% in urban areas). In contrast, 39 per cent of referrals from urban areas are men, and another 17 per cent are women. Although victims are generally referred from the same county in both settings (81% of the caseload in urban areas and 68% in rural areas), referrals from a different county are nine per cent more frequent in rural areas (22%).

Criminal exploitation is the most common type of exploitation in both urban and rural areas (55% and 66% of cases, respectively). This is followed by labour (38% urban, 32% rural) and sexual exploitation (18% urban, 15% rural). Notably, county lines involvement accounts for 31 per cent of cases in rural areas, compared to 21 per cent in urban areas, a difference of 10 percentage points.

35. Overrepresentation was calculated by comparing the share of foreign nationals among victims in each county cluster with their share of the resident population, using [ONS population estimates](#) by country of birth for England and Wales (discontinued in 2021) and equivalent sources for Scotland and Northern Ireland ([Scotland's Census 2011](#); [NISRA Census 2021](#)). To ensure comparability across the UK, local authority and council area data were aggregated where necessary to align with historic or preserved county boundaries.

## Counties with major transportation hubs

Counties with major transportation hubs account for 31,809 cases, or 58 per cent of the total caseload for Q1 2014 – Q3 2024, while representing approximately 42 per cent of the resident population, indicating a higher concentration of identified cases in these areas.<sup>36</sup> In these locations, 53 per cent of victims are foreign nationals, outnumbering British victims by six per cent. Notably, 81 per cent of referrals from transportation hub counties are made from the same county where exploitation occurred. This is significantly higher than in other counties, where the figure is 65 per cent.

This pattern may reflect the fact that major transportation hubs are not only transit points but also sites of labour and sexual exploitation. It may also indicate higher institutional capacity for identification and referral within these counties, allowing victims to be identified locally rather than after further movement. In addition, because the referral location is proxied by first responders' geographic coverage, as explained earlier, administrative structures in hub counties, where large police forces and agencies may operate, could influence how same-county referrals are classified. Further research would be needed to uncover these structural and operational dynamics.

At referral, victims in counties with major transportation hubs are slightly more likely to be adults (37% men and 17% women) than children (35% boys and 11% girls). Notably, six per cent of male victims and three per cent of female victims who were adults at referral had been children at the time of exploitation. The considerable proportion of victims who become adults before referral may indicate the challenges of identifying and referring victims in high-mobility settings. In contrast, in non-hub counties, victims are more frequently referred while still children (43% boys and 12% girls), and a smaller share of those exploited as minors reached adulthood before referral (5% for men and 1% for women).

Criminal exploitation accounts for a smaller share of the caseload in transportation hub counties (56%) than in non-hub counties (65%), a difference of 10 per cent. Similarly, county lines involvement is seven per cent lower in these areas, suggesting that criminal networks tend to be more localised. Conversely, labour (37%) and sexual exploitation (17%) are about five and two per cent more likely, respectively, in transportation hub counties.

36. Counties with major transportation hubs include Bristol, East Sussex, Essex, Greater London, Greater Manchester, Hampshire, Kent, Merseyside, Surrey, Tyne & Wear, West Midlands, and West Yorkshire.

## Border-region counties

Border-region counties<sup>37</sup> account for 1,839 cases or three per cent of referrals despite representing approximately eight per cent of the UK population, suggesting a lower share of identified cases relative to population size.<sup>38</sup> These victims are more frequently British (63%), with the remainder being foreign nationals. Most are children, both at the time of exploitation (46% boys, 15% girls) and at referral (43% boys, 13% girls). Notably, around six per cent of children became adults between the moment of exploitation and referral (3% boys, 2% girls).

Victims from border counties are referred from the same county where exploitation occurred in 58 per cent of cases, although this proportion is lower than in non-border counties, which account for 75 per cent. Criminal or sexual exploitation are also frequently registered, accounting for 63 and 19 per cent of the caseload, compared to 60 and 16 per cent registered in non-border counties. Similarly, county lines involvement (31%) is about five per cent higher in border counties. Conversely, labour exploitation, accounting for 30 per cent of cases, is about five per cent less common among these victims than among those from other areas.

## Counties with the 10 highest number of female victims

To explore patterns in areas where female victims are more numerically present, we examined the 10 counties reporting the highest number of female victims.<sup>39</sup> Together, these counties account for 31,180 while representing approximately 40 per cent of the UK population (58% of the total caseload), compared to 22,459 referrals (42%) in all other counties combined.<sup>40</sup>

Although this grouping is based on absolute numbers, females represent 26 per cent of referrals within these counties (14% women and 12% girls), while boys (38%) and men (32%) continue to comprise the majority of victims. 54 per cent of victims referred from these counties are foreign nationals. Notably, around six per cent of girls and four per cent of boys recorded as potential victims of exploitation as a child were recorded as adults at the time of their referral.

37. Border-region counties refer to those along internal UK borders (e.g., England-Scotland, England-Wales)

38. Border or cross-nation counties include Cheshire, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, and Shropshire (England-Wales); Cumbria and Northumberland (England-Scotland); County Antrim, County Armagh, County Derry/Londonderry, County Down, County Fermanagh, and County Tyrone (Northern Ireland).

39. Counties with the highest number of referred female victims include Bedfordshire, Essex, Greater London, Greater Manchester, Hampshire, Kent, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, West Midlands, and West Yorkshire

40. Figures are based on cases for which information on gender and county of exploitation was available at the time of data extraction (third quarter of 2024). Percentages may therefore reflect minor variations in denominators across variables.

Compared to counties with lower numbers of female victims, referrals in these counties are 20 per cent more frequently made from the same county where exploitation occurred (83% versus 63%, respectively). These counties account for 72 per cent of all domestic work exploitation cases nationally. Within these counties, this type of exploitation constitutes a larger share of referrals than in other counties with fewer female victims (about 15% higher). In contrast, the involvement of county lines, accounting for 22 per cent, is eight per cent less frequent, and the incidence of criminal exploitation (54%) is 10 per cent lower than in counties with fewer female victims. Labour and sexual exploitation display similar patterns across both groups of counties.

## Counties with the 10 highest number of male victims

The counties with the highest number of male victims also account for 31,237 cases or 58 per cent of the total victim caseload while representing approximately 40 per cent of the population, suggesting a similar geographic concentration of identified cases.<sup>41</sup> Victims referred from these counties are mainly British nationals, accounting for 52 per cent of the caseload. In these counties, the prevalence of males at the time of referral is about three times higher (36% of adults, 38% of children) than that of females (14% of adults, 11% of children). At the time of referral, about six per cent of referrals for potential victims who were boys at the time of their exploitation were recorded as adults at the time of their referral, threefold the proportion of girls who were referred as adults (2%).

In these counties, 83 per cent of victims are referred from the same county where exploitation occurred, which is about 20 per cent higher than in those counties with lower caseloads of male victims. Domestic work represents 72 per cent of referrals in these counties. Given the predominance of male victims in the overall caseload, this indicates that boys and men are also substantially represented in this form of exploitation. In other cases, victims are also trafficked for forced labour and sexual exploitation in 62 and 61 per cent of cases, respectively. County lines were involved in 22 per cent of the cases.

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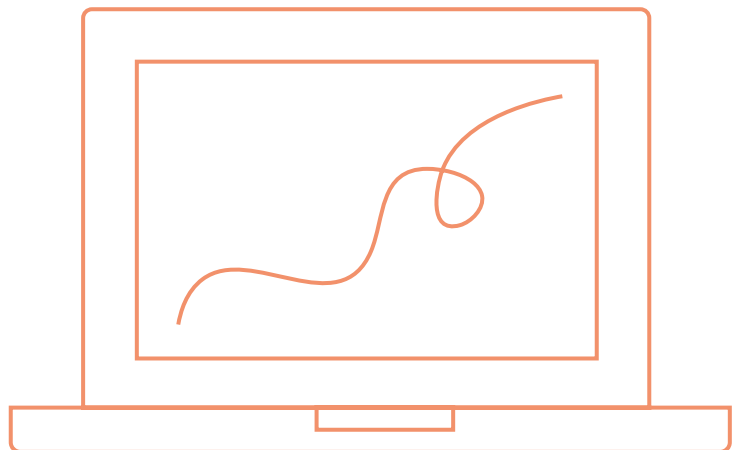
41. Counties with the highest number of referred male victims include Essex, Greater London, Greater Manchester, Hampshire, Kent, Leicestershire, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, West Midlands, and West Yorkshire

## Counties with the 10 highest number of child victims at referral

Counties with the highest number of child victims at the time of referral account for 30,841 cases or 57 per cent of the total victim caseload, while representing approximately 39 per cent of the population, indicating a higher concentration of identified cases involving children in these areas.<sup>42</sup> Victims referred from these counties are slightly more likely to be foreign nationals (52%), with the remainder being British.

In these counties, around nine per cent of cases recording potential exploitation during childhood were referred as adults (6% boys and 3% girls). While the proportion of children at the time of exploitation (51%; 39% boys, 12% girls) is higher than that of adults (45%; 31% men, 14% women), by the time of referral, the proportion of adults (54%; 37% men, 17% women) exceeds that of children (46%; 35% boys, 11% girls). The limitations of the data have been highlighted but such cases may include instances of delays between exploitation and referral.

Victims referred from counties with high caseloads of child victims are mainly exploited in the same county as referral, accounting for 83 per cent of cases. Also, 36 and 17 per cent of these victims experienced labour and sexual exploitation, slightly more frequently than those referred from other counties (33% and 16%, respectively). Conversely, the incidence of criminal exploitation (57%) is about eight per cent lower, and county lines involvement (23%) is six per cent less frequent.



42. Counties with the highest number of referred child victims include Essex, East Sussex, Greater London, Greater Manchester, Hampshire, Kent, Merseyside, Northamptonshire, West Midlands, West Yorkshire.

# Conclusion and policy implications

## Summary of key findings

This analysis of National Referral Mechanism data from 2014 to 2024 reveals substantial geographic and demographic variation in patterns of human trafficking across the UK. Referral volumes have increased markedly over the past five years. Men and boys now constitute a growing share of identified victims, overtaking women and girls, while British nationals, particularly children, represent an increasing proportion of referrals. Nevertheless, foreign nationals remain the largest group of identified victims. The data shows a small minority of cases recorded as potential victims of child trafficking who were referred to the NRM as adults.

Geographic disparities are pronounced. Referrals are concentrated in inland and urban counties, although coastal and rural areas remain significant for particular victim profiles and forms of exploitation. Counties with major transportation hubs, border regions, and areas with high numbers of female or child victims display unique exploitation patterns and referral dynamics. For instance, victims in border and rural counties are more frequently children and British nationals. In contrast, referrals from urban and hub counties are more likely to involve foreign nationals and adults. Criminal exploitation is most prevalent in specific counties, but labour and sexual exploitation are increasingly observed in others. Notably, county lines involvement is highest among British boys, particularly in rural and border counties.

No strong or significant relationships were found between referral volume and case outcomes, suggesting that areas making higher numbers of referrals do not appear to experience systematically different decision patterns than those with lower volumes. Likewise, no clear association was identified between diaspora size and referral patterns. This indicates that trafficking referrals are not simply a reflection of the size of migrant communities. Rather, vulnerability to trafficking appears to be unevenly distributed across migrant populations and cannot be explained by diaspora size alone. These findings underscore the importance of examining the contextual drivers of exploitation and identification practices, including conflict dynamics, organised crime activity, migration pathways, and local referral systems.

## Recommendations

### Further research and analysis

This briefing has conducted novel analysis of data on the geographies of exploitation and referral within the UK. However, further quantitative analysis of the NRM would provide new insights into these geographies. Qualitative research will also be necessary to identify and explore the possible factors that can help understand and explain the data.

- Research could be conducted to better understand the factors for gendered patterns of referrals to the UK NRM.
- Further research and analysis could be conducted to better understand how institutional mandates and operational practices shape referral pathways across exploitation types and locations.
- Further analysis could be conducted to better understand the factors that may help to explain the reasons that the locations of referral and exploitation do and do not align.
- Future prevalence estimations on the scale of modern slavery in the UK should consider the significant variations in referrals across the United Kingdom and should avoid relying on extrapolations from specific areas.

### NRM data collection and publication

The scale and sophistication of the collection and publication of data from the NRM is an important achievement of the UK government. However, there are opportunities for furthering this work which would improve understanding about the nature of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK and the experiences and outcomes for victims and the perpetrators responsible.

- The Home Office should consider collecting and publishing data on NRM referrals in a way that can show referrals which experienced exploitation both as a child and as an adult. It should also consider providing more granular data on the age of exploitation (as it does for age at referral). The availability of such data would help improve understanding about delays between exploitation and referral. It would also provide more detailed demographic profiles of referrals that could support improvements to identifying potential victims and the prevention of trafficking.

- The Home Office should consider developing systematic data collection on alleged traffickers' profiles for NRM referrals (e.g., nationality, gender, relationship to the victims). Collecting data on victims and perpetrators could help improve the identification of potential victims and inform the design of more sophisticated and targeted prevention activities. The data collection on the alleged perpetrators of NRM referrals could align with the recent International Classification for Administrative Data on Trafficking in Persons (IC-TIP)<sup>43</sup>

## Strengthening survivor identification and prevention approaches

- Governmental and non-governmental led public awareness raising campaigns should seek to design and deliver these in ways that best reflect the identified geographic and demographic patterns of referrals.
- The National Crime Agency, police forces, Home Office, regional Mayors and other relevant stakeholders should consider exploring how data on NRM referrals-per-population ratios can inform funding allocation for policing human trafficking.
- Data on geographical referrals and locations of exploitation could be used to help understand the impacts of localised counter-trafficking activities such as multi-agency anti-trafficking partnerships, policing operations and other initiatives.
- The Home Office should consider introducing further guidance for decision makers on gathering and assessing information on cases reporting exploitation exclusively outside of the UK.

## Final remarks

Improving data quality and coverage across all counties and victim groups is essential to further enhance the evidence base for more effective policy and practice. This means improving the accuracy of exploitation location data, since victims are likely to move frequently or are unaware of their exact locations. Future analyses would benefit from more detailed information on the context of exploitation, pathways to referral, and long-term outcomes for survivors. Continued investment in data infrastructure, visualisation, monitoring, and evaluation will be critical for strengthening the UK's response and prevention measures to human trafficking and modern slavery.

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43. <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/classifications/Family/Detail/2099>

# MODERN SLAVERY & HUMAN RIGHTS

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