Policy Brief:

Impact of Covid-19 on identification of potential victims of modern slavery in the UK in 2020.

Prof. Alex Balch, University of Liverpool and Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre; Olly Kennedy, Helen Bryant (Liverpool University), Patrick Burland (International Organization for Migration).*

In partnership with **CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL SLAVERY**

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New statistics show an end to year-on-year growth in the number of potential victims of modern slavery referred to the UK's National Referral Mechanism (NRM) – the national system for identifying potential victims and providing support. There were 10,613 individuals referred in 2020, almost exactly the same number as in 2019 (10,616)**, ending a pattern of growth that goes back to 2009 when the first figures were published. The aggregate figures mask a substantial rise in county lines referrals which involve children, and a marked drop in adult referrals during the first national lockdown. Considering it was expected that the Covid-19 pandemic would increase the risk of modern slavery, the figures raise questions about the true underlying level of modern slavery in the UK, and the effect of lockdowns and restricted mobility on frontline services and their capacity to identify potential victims.

This Policy Brief examines the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on identification of potential victims and underlying patterns of modern slavery. It considers barriers to identification and experiences and lessons learned by First Responders, who are the authorised individuals and organisations that refer potential victims.[1] Given the continuing impacts of the pandemic into 2021, the Policy Brief outlines lessons learned for understanding the nature and scale of modern slavery in the UK, opportunities for policymakers and practitioners in developing their response to new patterns and trends, and recommendations for the collection and presentation of NRM data.

* The opinions expressed in this briefing do not necessarily reflect the views of the IOM.

** This Policy Brief was published on the same day as the data for Q4 of 2020, therefore it only includes top line figures from it rather than an in-depth analysis of this quarter and the whole year of 2020. The end of year NRM data can be found at https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2020

Methodology. The Policy Brief is based on an independent analysis of published NRM data up to Q3, 2020,[2] and interviews with First Responders conducted by a team of researchers based at the University of Liverpool for the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery PEC). This Policy Brief does not include in-depth analysis of Q4 2020, which was published on the same day as this policy brief. It is our intention is to conduct further analysis including the data for the whole of 2020. First Responders were from a range of organisations including enforcement agencies, NGOs and local authorities. Semi-structured interviews were carried out and then transcribed before being coded using thematic analysis to draw out key topics and themes. As a small-sample analysis, the study has limitations in terms of the power to generalise across all First Responders, but provides insights into common issues, challenges and decision-making processes.

1. What changed in 2020?

The Covid-19 pandemic led to several phases of restrictions on movement and social contact referred to as 'lockdowns',[3] moving between full national lockdowns and then a mixture of other measures and restrictions.[4] Although the NRM remained operational as a pathway to support, organisations working in the sector have raised concerns about the impact of the pandemic on increased risks around modern slavery.[5]

The first lockdown started on 23rd March 2020 and covered England, Scotland and Wales (Northern Ireland from 28th March), resulting in a sharp drop in domestic and international travel[6] and massive impacts on economic sectors such as retail and hospitality.[7] Over the course of 2020 several further lockdowns were put in place, with some differences between the approaches of each part of the UK. The latest figures suggest the UK economy shrunk by 9.9% in 2020.[8]

a) There was an overall decrease in the number of potential victims referred to the NRM in Q2 and Q3 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.

The published NRM statistics in 2020 showed the first decreases in total numbers of potential victims referred after 13 successive quarters of increases (going back to Q4, 2016). In Q1, 2020 there were 14% fewer referrals than in the previous quarter, but it should be noted that this was still 33% higher than the same period 12 months earlier. Indeed, there were more referrals in 2020 (10,613) than in any year apart from 2019 (10,616). However, the departure from the longer-term pattern of growth is marked and in both Q2 and Q3 2020 referrals were lower than the corresponding periods in 2019.

Among the key contributing factors appears to be a reduction in referrals from Immigration Enforcement (IE) and UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI), who encounter potential victims of modern slavery through operational activities or during the asylum process. During 2019, IE and UKVI referred 28% and 31% of all adult referrals; this proportion dropped to 21% and 24% respectively in Q1-Q3 2020 (in the context of lower overall numbers).

Referrals from UKVI were particularly low in Q2 and correlate with a fall in asylum applications during the same quarter (in Q2 2020 there were 4,850 asylum applications, compared to 7,657 in Q2 2019),[9] along with other indicators of international travel such as air passenger numbers, which fell sharply from February 2020.[10]

The overall fall in 2020 was particularly pronounced for adult referrals in Q2, meaning that during that period, for the first time, the majority of all referrals were for children. This is important because safeguarding measures and the provision of support for potential victims of modern slavery are different for children. Key relevant measures, including the use of Child Trafficking Guardians, and the involvement of local safeguarding partners, remain at pilot stage and are yet to be rolled out nationally.[11]

	Referrals of potential victims of modern slavery in the UK in 2019 and 2020			
	Adult	Child	Unknown	Total
Q1 2019	1210	944		2154
Q2 2019	1326	983	3	2312
Q3 2019	1630	1175	1	2806
Q4 2019	1686	1445	213	3344
Q1 2020	1490	1217	157	2864
Q2 2020	843	1260	104	2207
Q3 2020	1222	1148	130	2500
Q4 2020	1532	1321	189	3042

Chart 1 - Proportion of referrals of adults/children/unknown Q4 2019 - Q3 2020
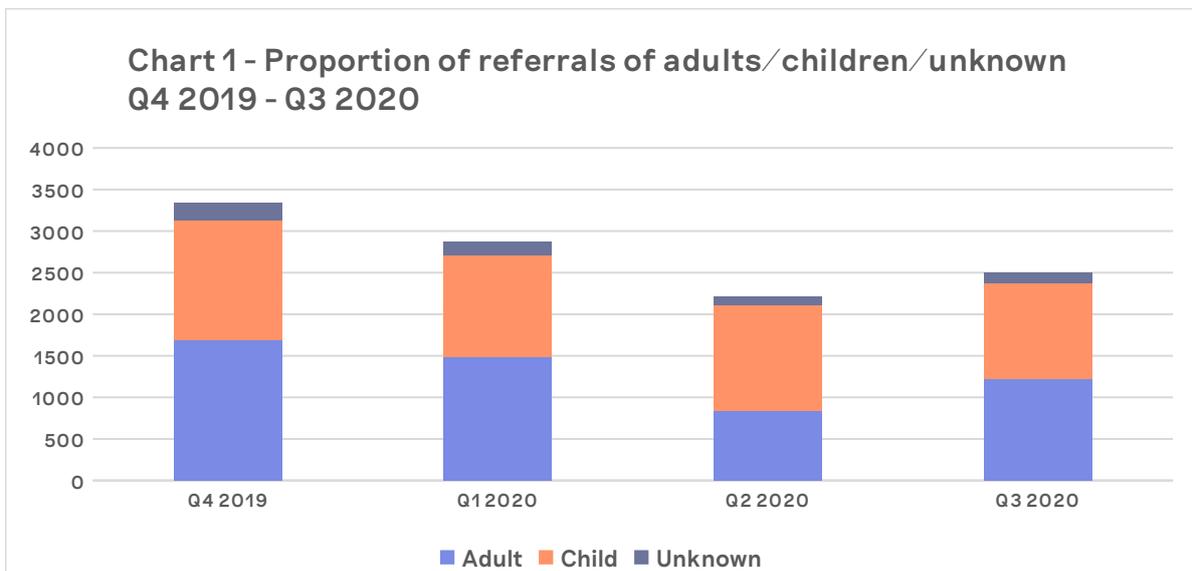
The picture was not uniform across the four nations that make up the UK, but it is not straightforward to compare because of the differences in population size.[12] However, it is notable that in Scotland the fall in referrals levelled out sooner than England after a drop in Q1, 2020, and both Scotland and Northern Ireland saw a rise in Q3, 2020. In Wales there was little change in adult referrals and child referrals were consistently higher throughout Q1-Q3, when compared with the same period in 2019.

b) There have been significant changes in the mix of exploitation types for NRM referrals, with notable increases in referrals for county lines and a reduction in referrals for sexual exploitation compared to 2019.

It is important to note the very significant changes in how NRM data is collated, which makes it difficult to compare the situation during and before the pandemic. The recording of multiple forms of exploitation and the introduction of criminal exploitation as a standalone category were introduced in Q4, 2019. Before this point criminal exploitation had been recorded under labour exploitation.

In addition to this change, historic data that had been collected on county lines[13] (going back to 2017) was published for the first time in Q2, 2020. County lines cases were recorded as a sub-type of exploitation until Q4 2019, after which time they have been recorded using a 'flag'.

Notwithstanding the increasing detail that is now included about types of exploitation, the NRM data suggest the first national lockdown had a marked effect beyond a simple reduction in aggregate numbers. The data for 2020 shows a general reduction in referrals of adults for sexual exploitation, but the greatest decrease numerically (rather than proportionately) was for adult referrals who had experienced labour exploitation: while this was almost the same number in Q1, 2020 as Q4, 2019 it then fell 52% from Q1, 2020 to Q2, 2020.
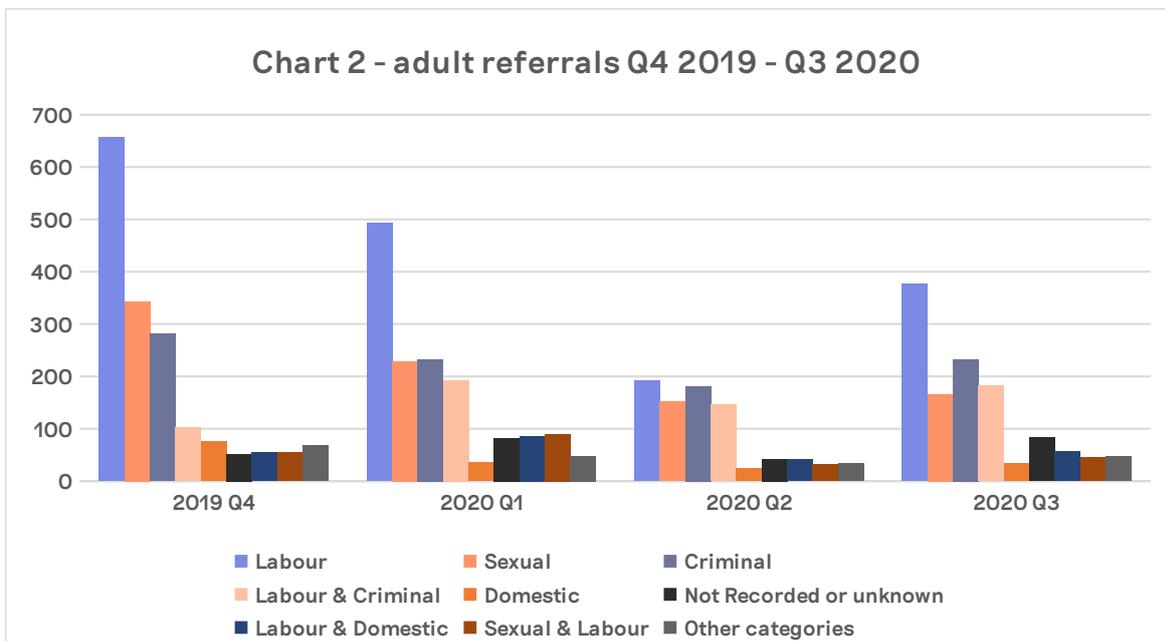
Chart 2 - adult referrals Q4 2019 - Q3 2020

Referrals of children exploited in "county lines"		
	2019	2020
Q1	273	190
Q2	257	381
Q3	250	367
Q4	259	433

Chart 3 - child referrals Q4 2019 - Q3 2020
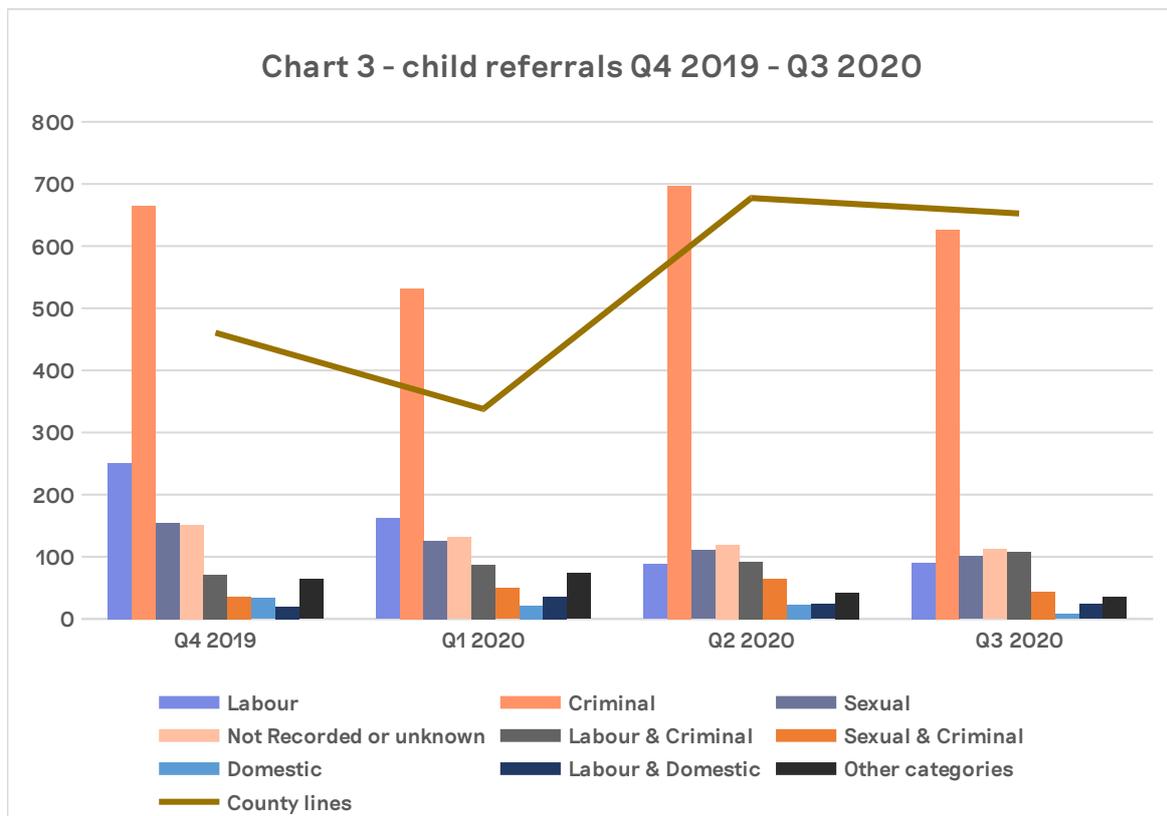
NB Charts 2 and 3: Since Q4 2019 First Responders have been able to report multiple exploitation types. For the Q4 2019-Q3 2020 data the chart above includes all figures for where there was single type of exploitation and for selected 'multiple' categories. 'Other categories' includes the remaining combinations of exploitation types that were less frequent. Exploitation for the purpose of organ harvesting, an extremely rare occurrence in the UK, is not included in these figures.

In Q1-Q3 2020 there was a significant fall in the proportion of labour exploitation referrals for children compared to the same period in 2019, but this mainly reflects the impact of a new separate category of criminal exploitation. Many of these were county lines cases (which, as explained earlier, is recorded in addition to main exploitation type), which saw a large increase between Q1 and Q2 2020.
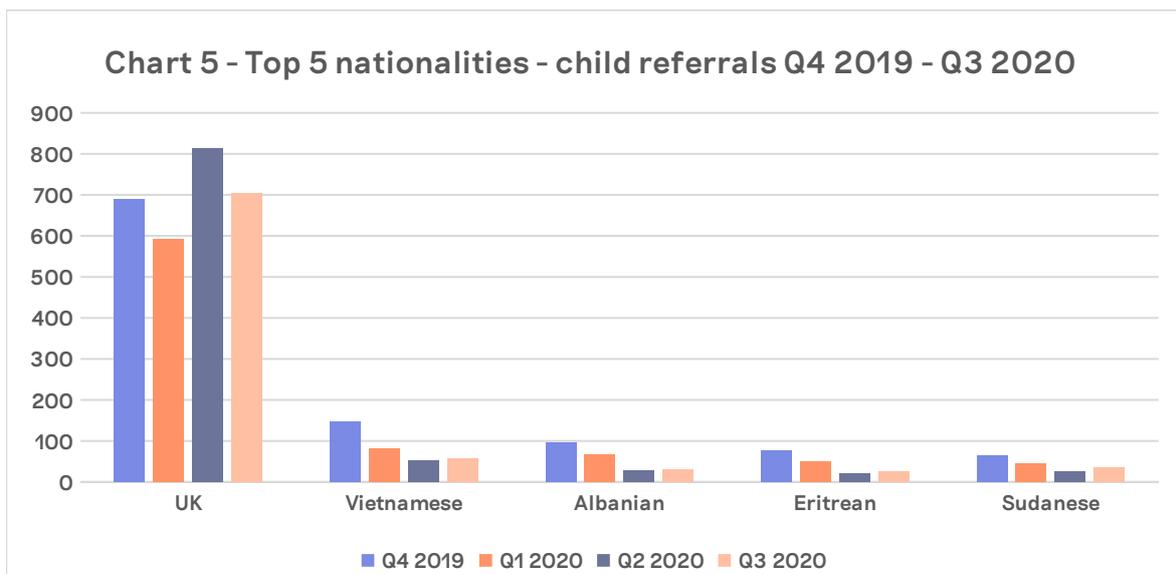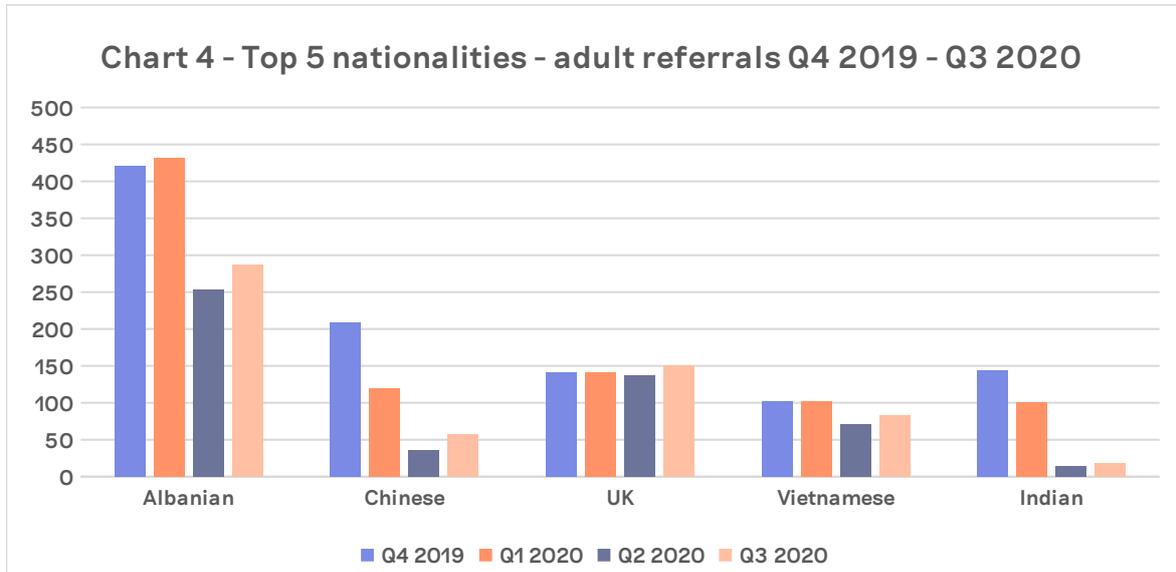
However, in addition to county lines referrals, it should be noted that significant numbers of children (mainly UK nationals) are being referred for other types of criminal exploitation. For example, in Q3, 2020 there were 367 children referred as a county lines case, but in that same quarter there were 789 children referred (when including any mention of criminal exploitation) leaving 422 where other forms of criminal exploitation were taking place (or county lines was not indicated).

There are regional differences in relation to child criminal exploitation. In England and Wales, the number of children referred, and the proportion categorised as criminal exploitation is higher than Scotland and Northern Ireland. For example, in Wales in Q3, 2020, 79% of children referred to the NRM were for criminal exploitation.

Number of referrals received by police forces for criminal exploitation of children (**where this was the only type of exploitation and criminal exploitation was mentioned alongside other types of exploitation**) in Q3, 2020
• England – 703 of 1026   (69%) • Wales – 58 of 73   (79%) • Scotland – 25 of 41   (61%) • Northern Ireland – 1 of 5   (20%)

There were notable differences in terms of the mix of nationalities of potential victims in the referrals for Q1-Q3, 2020. Although the number of different nationalities remained broadly similar to 2019, for adults there were drops in the numbers of people from Albania (41% less from Q1 to Q2 2020), India (86% less Q1 to Q2 2020) China (70% less Q1 2020 to Q2 2020) and significant falls in the numbers from Vietnam, Nigeria, Pakistan and Bangladesh. One exception was an increase in referrals of Sudanese nationals (from 10 in Q2, 2020 to 83 in Q3, 2020). By contrast, there were higher referrals for UK nationals for both children and adults in Q1-Q3 2020 compared to 2019.

Chart 4 - Top 5 nationalities - adult referrals Q4 2019 - Q3 2020

Legend: Q4 2019, Q1 2020, Q2 2020, Q3 2020

Chart 5 - Top 5 nationalities - child referrals Q4 2019 - Q3 2020

Legend: Q4 2019, Q1 2020, Q2 2020, Q3 2020

2. What were the experiences of First Responders?

a. Covid-19-related changes to working practices for frontline staff reduced opportunities to identify potential victims.

The lockdown measures raised concerns about visibility of potential victims of modern slavery and the ability of First Responders to identify them. In response to this there were examples of proactive work undertaken to try and 'find' potential victims affected by Covid-19, e.g. Project AIDANT – a national law enforcement intensification in June/July that focused on labour exploitation, and another multi-agency initiative in Wales.[14]

These initiatives were not mentioned by all the First Responders we were able to interview. Indeed, many told us that the pandemic led to drastic, unforeseen (and sometimes overnight) changes to organisational operating, causing disruption to already overburdened services. For some, working from home was introduced without warning, budgets were reallocated and funnelled into local Covid-19 responses, resources transitioned to Covid-19 taskforces, and teams were directly reduced because of Covid-19 related sickness. The cumulative effect of these changes diluted the ability of First Responders to ensure potential victims were identified and connected with key services.

Some First Responders spoke of the challenges Covid-19 presented in terms of building trust with potential victims: without face-to-face engagement their task became more difficult. They told us that a good level of trust can often be the difference between a potential adult victim consenting to an NRM referral or not. First Responders did however comment on the advantages of the online NRM referral process, implemented in August 2019. The online NRM system streamlined the referrals process and accommodated the new working from home operation.

b. First Responders confirmed some trends in the published data, but not others, e.g., some noted an increase in cases of sexual exploitation including a move to 'online'.

First Responders we spoke to confirmed some of the trends that emerge from the quarterly NRM statistics but also told us of changes that were not reflected in the published data. For the former, a good example is those referrals flagged as county lines. These were already on the increase before the pandemic, with the NRM data suggesting that, apart from a small fall in Q1, 2020, this has continued during the pandemic. The importance of this type of exploitation was confirmed in our interviews with First Responders (and is also reflected in other reports by enforcement authorities).[15]

Many of the First Responders we interviewed reported that they observed little significant change in patterns of modern slavery, or different patterns that diverge somewhat from picture created by the overall NRM data. For example, some First Responders reported that they had actually witnessed an increase in victims of sexual exploitation during 2020, but as noted above, this differs from the published data which indicates a drop in the percentage of adults referred from Q1-Q3 who had experienced sexual exploitation. There were also concerns expressed to us about the potential for changes to the ways in which exploitation happens, for example in relation to rising unemployment in particular sectors, or with risks relating to activities moving online, especially in relation to sexual exploitation, and questions raised about the ability to capture these trends through the NRM.

c. First Responders felt that national, aggregate NRM data often masked their own observations of the situation at local level.

First Responders commented that the quarterly NRM statistical bulletins only provide a partial picture for the purposes of local or regional policy responses when patterns of exploitation change. Often, the national narrative in terms of modern slavery trends contrasts with their experiences at the local level. Many of the interviewees called for increased regional detail in the bulletins to triangulate with their experience and regional sources of intelligence.

d. Despite the challenges of new working models, First Responders reported a variety of strategies they used to identify, refer or otherwise support potential victims.

First Responders who participated in this research described a variety of strategies they used to support potential victims of modern slavery outside the NRM system. They noted that such approaches, used to a lesser degree in the past, were becoming increasingly necessary. The NRM was fully operational throughout 2020, but First Responders told us that, as had been the case before the pandemic, many potential victims they encountered did not fit with the system of support offered by the NRM. As one of our interviewees said: "one challenge is there's people that don't fit neatly into that NRM box… So, there's those people that either refuse or aren't eligible or are particular high-need and hard to work with."

These strategies included providing a range of safeguarding options and resources, housing support, or the use of Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC)[16]. In some cases, we were told that the NRM is seen as a last option when a potential victim cannot be accommodated by alternative support mechanisms. This raises further questions about the interaction of the NRM system with the wider system of social support, and whether there are individual cases that 'fall through the gaps'. It appears that outcomes and appropriate care for potential victims, and others with high needs, are dependent upon the knowledge First Responders have of alternatives to an NRM referral.

3. Opportunities for policymakers and practitioners

a. Map regional trends and focus on new places and opportunities where those vulnerable to exploitation may come into contact with services

The evidence we collected suggests that social distancing and lockdowns and local context needs to be incorporated in strategies to respond to changing patterns and to ensure potential victims of modern slavery can be connected to appropriate services.

Consideration should be given to understanding the different types of places where potential victims may encounter frontline professionals, e.g., supermarkets, food banks, health care settings, including Covid-19 testing centres and vaccination spaces, job centres, homelessness services. Along with First Responder presence, food banks and vaccination spaces could utilise the UK Government's 'Ask for ANI' codeword scheme that is currently in place for victims of domestic abuse.[17] Efforts to encourage those with uncertain immigration status to come forward for vaccination[18] could also be an opportunity for training and signposting to appropriate support services where there are signs of exploitation.

The Home Office has developed a flyer on 'signs to spot' for modern slavery, and our research suggests the importance of these initiatives being co-designed with experienced First Responders as well as tailored to local contexts: in terms of risks of modern slavery, and the alternative pathways to services in the area if the NRM is not appropriate.

b. Dig deeper into the situation regarding county lines at the regional level, and in relation to NRM decision outcomes

The rise in county lines cases a number of concerns and has become a priority both politically and in terms of media attention. The decision to return to the historical data and reconcile all those cases that were flagged as county lines and publish data specifically on this sub-type of exploitation means it is now possible to see how such cases have risen over time.

However, we were told by some First Responders that county lines cases have ended up with negative CG (conclusive grounds) decisions, meaning that in the end they were not considered as victims of modern slavery. Publishing decision data disaggregated by different exploitation type would provide greater transparency on the outcomes of those referred to the NRM for criminal exploitation. Further research is also necessary to establish why there are rising cases and if these are ultimately confirmed as modern slavery.

This research could include interviews with child services and explore NRM decision outcomes to establish whether there is: a) involvement in criminality that does not meet the threshold for modern slavery, or b) risks that an operational emphasis on county lines is leading to confirmation bias or identification of marginal cases.

This briefing has highlighted that there are significant variations in the number of people being referred as potential victims of trafficking for criminal exploitation in England and Wales compared to Northern Ireland and Scotland. Providing a similar breakdown for referrals specifically for county lines cases is needed to better understand and respond to this important and growing problem.

c. Government and law enforcement agencies should start collecting and publishing more granular data to address a potential growth of sexual exploitation online

First responders provided anecdotal evidence of a shift online for sexual exploitation during 2020, although this was not reflected in the NRM statistics. Some First Responders we spoke to shared that they had begun to see patterns of increasing levels of online sexual exploitation correlating with local impacts of greater unemployment in certain sectors (e.g. hospitality), but this evidence was not clear enough to make firm recommendations.

There are important differences between sexual exploitation that occurs in person and that which occurs online, and this has implications in terms of enforcement and support needs, but we should be careful to follow robust evidence rather than anecdotal reports or incomplete data. For example, there has been more abusive material accessed online during the pandemic[19], but it is unclear whether that is being produced in the UK.

There is a case for the NRM referral to collect more information about the methods of exploitation to allow for greater understanding of patterns and how these are changing. However, as with county lines, it is important that this is done on the basis of rigorous research, drawing where possible (and where appropriate) on intelligence from First Responders and casefile evidence, rather than responding to new 'conventional wisdom' or media interest in a particular form of exploitation.

d. The NRM Transformation Programme should consider ways to improve the collection and publication of data

The NRM Transformation Programme is to be welcomed and it is appropriate this is prioritising support and assistance, but there is also a case for transforming the way NRM data is collected and published.

First, more could be done to improve understanding of local trends and patterns – by presenting a greater level of local detail in the NRM quarterly statistical bulletins or publishing more granular data alongside the bulletins for example through open data tables (which is the approach taken with police recorded crime statistics[20]). To do this it may be useful to triangulate the NRM statistics with the experience of First Responders to develop locally targeted publication of data. This would have the added benefit of increasing intelligence flows and enabling the allocation of appropriate resources and support for local responses. However, care must be taken to do this in a way that does not result in compromising anonymity. When numbers are low for particular areas revealing nationality and exploitation type, this may be sufficient for individual potential victims to be identified.

Second, the publication of more detail on exploitation types, and the combination of multiple forms of exploitation, is to be welcomed. However, there is a need for research to establish the value of these new categories for understanding changing patterns, and the complex picture behind national trends. There have been clear benefits of publishing historical data on county lines to provide insight into this trend, but it is important to understand patterns and trends for all sub-types of exploitation, such as cases relating to cannabis farming.

Finally, the limitations of the NRM data are amplified by a natural tendency for the public debate on modern slavery to focus on a rise or fall in 'headline' figures. As this briefing demonstrates, the aggregated statistics can obscure a more complex underlying situation. Our recommendation is, alongside the more granular/localised approach proposed above, to explore the use of complimentary data sources and contextual information. This could paint a more complete picture of the exploitative environment in the UK and improve prevention efforts, but would need to be based on research about the best way to combine multiple data sources, such as figures on labour market enforcement and compliance. An example is the Health and Safety Pyramid (known as Heinrich's Triangle) where data can be used to identify patterns and markers before crisis point is reached. Alongside the publication of more detail by region, research into the combining of data-sets could help respond to concerns we heard from First responders that there is a gap between the NRM statistics and their first-hand understanding of the nature and scale of modern slavery in the UK.

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Endnotes

1. First Responders are from organisations that are authorised to refer individuals to the National Referral Mechanism, including enforcement agencies, local authorities, and non-government organisations https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-trafficking-victims-referral-and-assessment-forms/guidance-on-the-national-referral-mechanism-for-potential-adult-victims-of-modern-slavery-england-and-wales

2. This Policy Brief does not include in-depth analysis of Q4 2020, which was published on the same day as this policy brief. It is our intention is to conduct further analysis including the data for the whole of 2020

3. House of Commons briefing Number 9068, 3 December 2020, 'Coronavirus: A history of English lockdown laws' https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9068/

4. ONS (Office of National Statistics): Important dates and events: https://style.ons.gov.uk/category/coronavirus/important-dates-and-events/

5. See, for example, reports by Delta 8.7 and Walk Free: https://delta87.org/2020/03/impact-covid-19-modern-slavery/ https://www.walkfree.org/reports/protecting-people-in-a-pandemic/

6. ONS: https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/tourismindustry/articles/coronavirusandtheimpactontheuktravelandtourismindustry/2021-02-15

7. Quinio, V (2021) https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2021/01/06/smaller-places-recovered-much-faster-than-big-cities-after-lockdown-but-that-doesnt-mean-they-will-do-better-when-the-pandemic-is-over/

8. ONS: https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp

9. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/asylum-and-resettlement-datasets

10. ONS: Weekly air passenger figures: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/coronaviruscovid192020incharts/2020-12-18

11. ECPAT 'Child trafficking in the UK 2020: A snapshot', Every Child Protected Against Trafficking (ECPAT UK) https://www.ecpat.org.uk/child-trafficking-in-the-uk-2020-snapshot

12. According to 2019 figures, England has a population of 56.29 million, Scotland 5.5 million, Wales 3.29 and Northern Ireland 1.89 million https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates

13. County Lines is defined by the NPCC (National Police Chiefs Council) as "a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas [within the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of "deal line"." County Lines - National Crime Agency

14. 2020 Annual UK Report on Modern Slavery, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2020-uk-annual-report-on-modern-slavery

15. France, A. (2020) Evening Standard: https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/newslondon/county-lines-arrests-on-rail-network-top-1000-as-police-use-slavery-law-in-crackdown/ar-BB1dwwLW

16. A MARAC is a meeting between representatives of local police, health, child protection, housing practitioners, and other specialists from the statutory and voluntary sectors to discuss options for supporting the potential victim of modern slavery. Adapted from https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/MARAC%20FAQs%20General%20FINAL.pdf

17. Gov.uk: codeword scheme: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-abuse-how-to-get-help#codeword-scheme

18. BBC News, 8th February 2021: 'Covid: 'No deportation risk' for illegal migrants getting vaccination' https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-55978334

19. Jeffreys, B. 16th July 2020: 'Huge rise in reports of online child abuse images' https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-53417284

20. Gov.uk: Police recorded crime and outcomes open data tables https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-recorded-crime-open-data-tables

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