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The Impact of COVID-19 on Modern Slavery in the United Kingdom

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this study is to aid practitioners and researchers in understanding the impact of COVID-19 on modern slavery in the United Kingdom. This report seeks to highlight the key findings of a scoping study undertaken at St Mary's University as part of the MA in Human Trafficking, Migration, and Organised Crime that would be of value and interest to those working in the sector. Understanding the impacts of the pandemic on modern slavery is essential to appropriately mitigate risks and safeguard vulnerable people such as children, women, migrants, and survivors of modern slavery. 134 studies were analysed to answer the research question, "What are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on modern slavery in the United Kingdom?"

This study found the most significant impact of the pandemic thus far to be increased vulnerabilities for people who were already at risk of being exploited pre-pandemic. Higher rates of child sexual abuse and child criminal exploitation, risks to people making irregular border crossings, increases in gender-based violence and sexual exploitation, and changes to victim identification and survivor care are further key impacts affecting modern slavery that are reported across the United Kingdom.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on modern slavery in the UK has been prolific and is anticipated to have lasting consequences. Safeguarding the most vulnerable of our communities will be essential as the pandemic continues to evolve and rebuilding efforts continue. The government response needs to focus on increasing funding to provide services in an accessible and appropriate manner. Further, political will and focus needs to remain on mitigating risks long term for vulnerable persons.

Based on the findings of this study, recommendations include that the UK should prioritise improving, not relaxing, prior regulations and services available to vulnerable people. This report also concludes that rebuilding efforts must take the initial effects of the pandemic on modern slavery into account to ensure the most vulnerable in communities are safeguarded against further exploitation.

Acronyms

BTP	British Transport Police
CCE	Child Criminal Exploitation
CL	County Lines
COVID-19	SARS-CoV-2 Virus
CSAM	Child Sexual Abuse Material
CSE	Child Sexual Exploitation
EU	European Union
FLEX	Focus on Labour Exploitation
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GLAA	Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authorities
IWF	Internet Watch Foundation
JBI	Joanna Briggs Institute
LPCC	Lancashire Police and Crime Commissioner
MSA	Modern Slavery Act
MSOICP	Modern Slavery and Organised Immigration Crime Programme
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NHS	National Health Service
NRM	National Referral Mechanism
OCG	Organised Crime Group
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USA	United States of America
WHO	World Health Organisation

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating effects across the globe and in the United Kingdom (UK). The effects have not only been medical, as the resulting lockdowns have impacted the mental and social wellbeing of people and the global economy. The pandemic has exacerbated existing social issues such as poverty, food shortages, and modern slavery across the globe.¹ *The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*, commonly referred to as the Palermo Protocol, was ratified by the UK in 2006 (UN Treaty Collection, 2021), and defines modern slavery in Article 3 as:

“the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.” (UN General Assembly, 2000)

Further, Article 3 of the Protocol notes that “where the victim has not reached the age of 18”, it is not necessary to prove force, fraud, or coercion; instead, their status as a minor qualifies them for assistance as a victim of exploitation (UN General Assembly, 2000). A child cannot consent to their exploitation under any circumstance and are granted special protections that governments must provide. For the purpose of this study, the definition of modern slavery has been broadened to include all forms of exploitation that the UK accepts in the NRM.

The pandemic is anticipated to affect modern slavery globally, including in the UK, by increasing drivers (‘push’ factors of modern slavery) and the promise of opportunities elsewhere (‘pull’ factors). Additionally, as seen with prior disasters and disease outbreaks, those already vulnerable such as children, women, migrants, asylum seekers, people living in poverty, racial and ethnic minorities, and victims and survivors of modern slavery, will be at an increased risk of being impacted by the disaster.²

This research focuses on examining the breadth of literature available to answer the question, “What are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on modern slavery in the United Kingdom?”. Presently, no comprehensive research exists focusing exclusively on the effects of the pandemic on modern slavery across the UK that includes all forms of literature, including grey literature and academic journals. Thus, this research is valuable as it fills this fundamental gap in knowledge by evaluating the initial impacts of the pandemic so that services and research can be adapted to best serve victims, survivors, and those vulnerable to exploitation.

A scoping study is conducted to encapsulate all available relevant data including grey literature, organisation reports, government documents, academic journal articles, and web pages. By conducting a scoping study, the research is able to examine the impacts the virus and the subsequent lockdowns, have on modern slavery in the UK.

1 The term ‘modern slavery’ is used widely across the UK. It incorporates human trafficking, slavery, forced labour, and child criminal exploitation. Internationally, these forms of exploitation are generally referred to collectively as ‘human trafficking’. This report uses ‘modern slavery’ and ‘human trafficking’ interchangeably as it addresses exploitation in the UK and globally. However, preference is given to ‘modern slavery’ as the scoping review focuses primarily on the UK.

2 ‘Victim’ is used to describe those currently being exploited. ‘Survivor’ identifies those who were previously victims but are not currently being exploited.

2. COVID-19 and Modern Slavery

This section examines existing literature to show how the pandemic has impacted the UK specifically. It also works to establish how COVID-19 may have impacted modern slavery and examines the various forms of modern slavery, vulnerabilities for modern slavery, and case rates in the UK prior to the pandemic, thus creating a baseline for the findings.

2.1 Effects of COVID-19 in the UK

Since the first reported case of COVID-19 within UK borders on January 30th, 2020 (Lillie et al., 2020), there have been over 22.1 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 192,464 deaths within the UK as of May 5th, 2022 (Public Health England, 2021). Additionally, 314,000 people have been made redundant, and millions were furloughed or assigned a leave of absence from work during the lockdowns (ibid). The inability to work or access school feeding programs has further destabilised communities. Children missing at least one meal a day across the UK rose from 25% to 35%, and an additional 10% are expected to have missed more than one meal per day during the first lockdown in 2020 (Baraniuk, 2020, p.1). Further, there was a 175% increase in food parcels distributed to needy families in April 2020 compared to the same timeframe in 2019 (ibid). These figures are an indication of widespread despair and inability to meet the most basic need of feeding oneself and family.

The stress of being unable to provide for one’s family, coupled with the stress of multiple lockdowns, has contributed to the increase of violence in the home (Nicola et al., 2020). In the UK within a two-week period of 2020, 16 deaths were attributed to domestic violence, more than double the average of that same time span over the past decade (Roesch et al., 2020, p. 1). This is indicative of a wider spread issue of abuse within the home and the increase of mental health issues across the nation. Domestic abuse helplines have had an increase of calls over the first lockdown, and it can be assumed that subsequent lockdowns have and will continue to contribute to an increase of people seeking help (Nicole et al., 2020).

At times, the governmental response has been inadequate to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and those seeking assistance. The UK government has not addressed existing vulnerabilities exacerbated by the pandemic, such as poverty, and has further reduced the response to these issues by diverting focus away to manage the pandemic (Douglas et al., 2020; Seddighi, 2020). Governmental inadequacy can also be seen in programs that target redundant workers but make no provision for zero-hours contract workers or those in the informal economy (Douglas et al., 2020). Thus, the governmental response has contributed to further suffering and struggles by those already vulnerable.

2.2 Modern Slavery in the UK

As established, the UK has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic at all levels of society. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the pandemic will also affect modern slavery within the UK. Often, traffickers target already vulnerable groups of people. Therefore, as vulnerability increases due to the pandemic, the quantity of victims identified throughout the pandemic may shift. This shift will be quantifiable through data from the National Referral Mechanism (NRM).

The NRM tracks identified victims of modern slavery within the UK by type of exploitation, sex of victim, age, and nationality (Home Office, 2021). It does not, however, track racial identity of identified victims which has been recognised as a shortcoming of the system (BASNET, 2021). The NRM has tracked increasing numbers of identified victims over the past several years climbing from just over 5,100 identified

victims in 2017, to 10,627 in 2019 (Home Office, 2021).

Victims identified each year include both male and female victims, and adult and minor victims, who originate from multiple countries and are exploited in various ways. In 2019, the top three source countries for victims referred to the NRM were the UK (27% of referrals), Albania (16% of referrals), and Vietnam (8% of referrals) (Home Office, 2019, p.4). Further, in 2014, 57.3% of UK nationals referred to the NRM were minors, compared to 84.1% in 2019 (Schwarz et al., 2021b, p. 7). This sharp increase is attributed in part to the rise of the County Lines (CL) throughout the UK over the past several years as gangs have adapted their drug dealing business model to maximise profits (Schwarz et al., 2021b).

Gang activity has not been classified as modern slavery or eligible for referral to the NRM in the past as those involved were assumed to be willing participants. However, CL have been categorised in the NRM since late 2019 (Caluori et al., 2020). CL specifically target vulnerable adults, and children who are unable to give consent for exploitation under the Palermo Protocol (2000) (Cooper et al., 2017).

2.3 Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many aspects of life and increased existing vulnerabilities to modern slavery such as poverty, Gender Based Violence (GBV) and access to education and food. It is reasonable to expect that the pandemic will impact cases of modern slavery within the UK and shift patterns of exploitation. In the rebuilding efforts, it is vital to understand the impacts and shifts on modern slavery to inform best practices for victim identification, survivor care, and for addressing vulnerabilities. The full effects of the pandemic on modern slavery in the UK have yet to be realised. Measuring the initial impacts will be essential in adapting responses as containment measures for the virus become more effective and the rebuilding efforts begin (Public Health England, 2021).

3. Methodology

Section three discusses the importance of utilising a scoping study as the methodology for this research as it is best suited for including academic literature and grey literature. Grey literature refers to “documents that are produced by and for organisations and companies” (Matthews and Ross, 2010, p. 95). Academic peer-reviewed data is largely forthcoming on the effects of the pandemic on modern slavery, so the inclusion of grey literature is essential to understand the initial impacts of the pandemic. This scoping study utilises JBI Manual (Peters et al., 2020) guidelines for a scoping study to ensure accurate and trustworthy results and as such, the section reviews how the protocol was followed in the selection process for the included data and analysis of the data.

3.1 Protocol

The scoping study follows the protocol steps in the JBI Manual to maximise the strength of the study (Peters et al., 2020). Fulfilling the JBI Manual guidance, the inclusion criteria were purposefully broad and are as follows:

1. The sources must be dated from January 1, 2020- August 11, 2021, to match the COVID-19 pandemic timeline in the UK and the research timeline
2. The data must address modern slavery and COVID-19 in the UK, or broadly on a global scale (not specific to another country)
3. Sources must be focused on modern slavery as it is defined in the Palermo Protocol, and where victims of exploitation are eligible for referral to the NRM
4. Sources must be in English due to the author’s limited ability to have sources reliably translated from another language

Fulfilling additional steps of the JBI Manual, multiple search engines and search terms were utilised to identify data to be evaluated against the research criteria (Peters et al., 2020). These were Summon’s (St Mary’s University search engine), Google Scholar, Google, direct journal search of the Journal of Human Trafficking, direct website searches on the various United Nations (UN) websites to collect reports on a global scale, and handsearching references for additional sources. The search terms included, “Modern slavery AND COVID-19”, “Modern slavery AND Pandemic”, “Human Trafficking AND COVID-19”, “County Lines AND Pandemic/COVID-19” to diversify the results and include specific forms of exploitation. The searches took place between July 18th, 2021, and August 11th, 2021. Together, 134 data sources met the criteria for final inclusion.

The final 134 data sources ranged in type from NGO statements to academic journal articles and government guidelines. As is standard for scoping studies, the studies were not weighted or categorised by study type (Peters et al., 2020). Instead, data was sorted into thirteen categories based on topic. The topic categories were chosen from loose similarities of main points in the study as noted during the abstract reviews.

4. Findings

The final 134 sources included in the scoping study, as outlined in section three, are categorised, and summarised in this section to measure the impact of the pandemic on modern slavery in the UK. The data was initially categorised into thirteen categories, then narrowed into seven final categories based on similarity of facts and data. The initial and final categories are shown in Table 1.

Initial Thirteen Categories	Final Seven Categories
Impact- Global (n=55)	Global Impact
Impact- UK (n=92)	UK Impact
Child Sexual Exploitation (n=36)	Child Exploitation
Victim Identification and Services (n=73)	Gender-Based Violence and Sexual Exploitation
County Lines (n=17)	Migration
Supply Chains (n=25)	Changes in Victim Identification and Survivor Services
Sexual Exploitation or Sex Trafficking (n=21)	Supply Chains and Labor Exploitation
Laborers (n=44)	
Migration/Asylum Seekers (n=39)	
Increased Risks/Vulnerabilities (n=78)	
Gender Based Violence (n=18)	
Recruitment n=17	
Response/Rebuilding (n=88)	

Table 1. Column one displays the initial thirteen categories of data and column two shows the final seven categories of data.

4.1 Global and UK Impacts

At the time of writing (August 2021), the initial effects of the pandemic on modern slavery are beginning to be reported across the world. There are mixed reports of how long-lasting the impacts of the pandemic on modern slavery will be due to the adapting and changing variants of the virus, and vaccines being distributed unequally around the world (Onyeaka et al., 2021). However, all 134 sources for this study agree

that there are impacts. The Lancashire Police and Crime Commissioner (LPCC) is the only source in this study to report a mainly positive effect of the pandemic on modern slavery in their area of the country (LPCC, 2020). The LPCC defines the positive change as the increased ability to identify victims of sex trafficking due to lockdowns making those on the street more noticeable. Further, they report that all services remain in place to serve survivors. The LPCC also reports concern for the adaptivity of illicit businesses as a negative impact (LPCC, 2020). The remaining 133 sources report increased difficulties in addressing modern slavery due to the pandemic. Moreover, the literature also reports that impacts have been far reaching and currently are most noticeable for those who were vulnerable prior to the start of the pandemic.

4.2 Increased Vulnerabilities

Those who had vulnerabilities and risk factors for modern slavery prior to the pandemic are at an increased risk of being impacted by the pandemic. The intersection of vulnerabilities happens when a person who has vulnerabilities pre-disaster (such as poverty) also experiences new disaster-created vulnerabilities (such as homelessness). Of the 134 data sources included in the scoping study, 78 specifically note an increase of vulnerabilities due to the pandemic. While these include a multitude of risk factors, most often noted were the ‘push’ factors of increased poverty, lack of food availability, lack of supervision of children out of school, lack of access to survivor support services including mental health and the court systems, and inability to migrate to the UK in legal ways (Hope for Justice, 2020; Kotlyarenko et al., 2020; Rafferty, 2020). The UK government and NGOs declare that they expect to see an increase post-pandemic of new modern slavery victims, and survivors who are re-exploited by traffickers due to new and magnified existing vulnerabilities (Hope for Justice, 2020; London Modern Slavery Leads Network, 2020; Milne, 2020; Rafferty, 2020; MSOICP, 2021). New victims may emerge for a variety of reasons including increased poverty acting as a ‘push’ factor for exploitation (Hope for Justice, 2020; MSOICP, 2021). Each category discussed below will also summarize specific changes in vulnerabilities.

4.3 Child Exploitation

4.3.1 Child Sexual Abuse

In March 2020, children across the UK were sent home from school to safeguard them against the virus (Children’s Commissioner, 2020). Simultaneously, many parents and caregivers also began working from home while caring for and monitoring their children and their education. As the decision to move children to distance learning was made quickly, many schools and guardians were unable to set up appropriate safeguards for children online. (Europol, 2020; Piephoff, 2021; Tech Against Trafficking, 2020). This additional unsupervised time online increased the likelihood that children would be sexually exploited and encounter online predators (ECPAT International, 2020; Hope for Justice, 2020; Wagner and Hoang, 2020; US Department of State, 2021). Currently, it is estimated that 1 in 5 children receive requests for sexual images of themselves or are solicited for sexual acts while online (Hoffman et al., 2020, p. 5). The risk of sexual exploitation for children throughout the pandemic was reported in 36 of the final sources in the scoping study and listed as a top priority for organisations and governmental response during the pandemic.

The UN and governments across Europe, including the UK, also note an increase in demand for child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online (Davy, 2020; Giammarinaro, 2020; Kotlyarenko et al., 2020; Singhateh, 2020; Wagner and Hoang, 2020). The increased demand is due in part to adults spending additional time online and having more privacy as they work remotely and isolate at home (Europol, 2020; Kotlyarenko et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020). Moreover, governments note an increase of discussion on perpetrator’s online forums around how to engage with and groom children over social media to send self-generated child sexual content (ECPAT International, 2020; Europol, 2020; Giammarinaro, 2020; Hope for Justice, 2020; US Department of State, 2021; Wagner

and Hoang, 2020).

It is probable that child sexual abuse within the home for online viewing will increase due to time spent at home, additional demand, and sudden family poverty if guardians lose their source of income (ECPAT International, 2020; Tech Against Trafficking, 2020; Wagner and Hoang, 2020). This is true for children both within the UK, and those abroad with their online perpetrators being in the UK (Jimenez et al., 2021). The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) reports that during the first month of lockdown in 2020 there were 8.8 million attempts to view CSAM in the UK (IWF, 2020, n.p.). No like data set exists pre-pandemic to compare this number against (IWF, 2020). Additionally, there are reported risks that post-pandemic traffickers and abusers within the UK who have built ‘relationships’ with children via social media may travel to meet those children in person and further exploit them (ECPAT International, 2020; Europol, 2020). These risks require a holistic response from the government to safeguard children within UK borders and address the threat to children overseas by UK nationals (IWF, 2020; Jimenez et al., 2021). Children are not only experiencing a heightened risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE) during the pandemic, but also other forms of exploitation including child criminal exploitation (CCE).

4.3.2 County Lines and Child Criminal Exploitation

In 2020, there was a decrease of overall victims referred to the NRM, yet an increase in child victim referrals. The Home Office (2021) states the number of overall referrals in 2020 as 10,613 (p.1), however the number of overall referrals in 2019 was 10,627 (Home Office, 2019, p.1). Further, Balch et al. (2021) identifies 4,547 child victim referrals in 2019 and 4,946 referrals in 2020 (p.3). Thus, there has been an increase in the total percentage of child referrals across the UK.

	Child Victims Referred	Total Victims Referred	Total percentage of Child Referrals
2019	4,547	10,627	43%
2020	4,946	10,613	46%

Table 2. Number of referrals to the NRM in 2019 and 2020

Also notable is the increase in potential victims referred to the NRM for exploitation through CL across all four nations of the UK. In 2019, 1,039 children were referred due to exploitation in CL, and in 2020 this rose to 1,371 (Balch et al., 2021, p. 5). CCE cases represented 69% of referrals for children in England in 2020, 79% for children in Wales, 61% in Scotland, and only 20% in Northern Ireland (Balch et al., 2021, p.6). The rise in CCE referrals demonstrates the need for the UK government to safeguard children not only from sexual exploitation during the pandemic, but also to focus heavily on responding to the criminal exploitation of children. Impacts to CCE and CL are stated in seventeen sources of this study.

Prior to the pandemic, the CL hierarchy relied on youth recruited by drug gangs in metropolitan areas taking drugs to rural counties (Pitts, 2020). Jimenez et al., (2021) report a change to the model of CL and an increased risk of children and youth being active in CCE during the pandemic. Youths traveling on trains alone are at heightened risk of recognition by the British Transport Police (BTP) as the national lockdowns had restricted travel on public transportation (Brewster et al., 2020). Consequently, the BTP report an increase of identification of CL victims on trains and in stations over the first several months of lockdown in 2020 (Brewster et al., 2021). Additionally, the Metropolitan Police report “an increase of 42% in positive stop and search drug outcomes since March [2020]” (Caluori et al., 2020, p. 68).

However, the increased identification of out-of-town youth has pressured the leaders of the CL to adapt their business model during

the pandemic to continue making profits. One such adaptation is the recruitment of local children through social media to distribute the drugs in the rural towns instead of exporting children and drugs from the cities (Brewster et al., 2020; Caluori, 2020; Caluori et al., 2020; Harding, 2020; Brewster et al., 2021). By recruiting local children, the likelihood of being noticed by police is minimised and the time they are away from home is reduced (Brewster et al., 2020; Caluori, 2020; Harding, 2020). The reduction in time away from home has significantly decreased the number of children reported as missing since the first lockdown compared to the same time frame in 2019 (Caluori, 2020). In north Wales, 91 children were reported missing in April of 2019 and in April of 2020 only 28 were reported missing (Caluori, 2020, n.p.). Further, in an inner London borough only 13 children were reported missing from March to May 2020, whereas in March 2019 alone 39 children were missing (Caluori, 2020, n.p.). Overall, since the beginning of the pandemic there has been a 35% decrease of reported missing children across the UK (Brewster et al., 2021, p. 2). While children in metropolitan areas are still at risk of being put 'on the lines' during the pandemic, they have mainly been relocated to drug dealing within the metropolitan area they originate from (Caluori, 2020; Caluori et al., 2020; Siggers, 2020). This again has contributed to the decrease in children reported as missing as they can distribute drugs and use their home as the base. Children who are still being put 'on the lines' during the pandemic are those with the highest vulnerabilities such as those in care, with known gang affiliations, or suffering abuse (Caluori, 2020; Caluori et al., 2020). These children are still being reported missing and are being reported missing for a longer period (Brewster et al., 2021), although the exact increase of time missing has not been stated by the sources. The increased length in absences is an attempt by the gangs to minimise travel for the children, and thus detection by police during the lockdowns (Caluori, 2020; Caluori et al., 2020).

A further adaptation is the utilisation of car services such as Uber, or car rentals, to transport drugs to the rural areas. Children sent from the city are also being transported in cars instead of trains and left for longer periods of time in the rural area (Brewster et al., 2020; Caluori, 2020). This has increased the child's risk of harm in the rural town as they are left without a support network and with a larger stash of drugs. Additionally, the pandemic has reduced the utilisation of 'cuckooing' which refers to the OCG staying in the home of a vulnerable person in the rural town. This has diminished due to fear that if the vulnerable person were to contract COVID-19 it would expose the cuckooer and their drug stash to social care workers and authorities (Caluori et al., 2020; Harding, 2020; Brewster et al., 2021). The movement away from cuckooing has also been a contributing factor in utilising local youth more often as they already have a home in the dealing area (ibid). These shifts in the CL model during lockdowns to maximise profits demonstrates the adaptability of the OCGs. The flexibility of the gangs necessitates an equally calculated response from the government.

4.3.3 Governmental Response to Child Exploitation

The adapting CL model and governmental focus on mitigating the effects of the pandemic have made it increasingly difficult to address CL and CCE during the pandemic. The UK Government reports that it is a priority to respond to the increased risks to children during the pandemic and has dedicated £1.6 million to the *National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's Childline* (Home Office and Atkins, 2020; Jimenez et al., 2021). Further, the Home Office has created a 'Vulnerable Children's Hub' with £34 million in funding to support vulnerable children at risk of CSE, CCE, and other forms of modern slavery (Home Office and Atkins, 2020; Jimenez et al., 2021, p. 37). However, the governmental response has not increased and strengthened as quickly as the demand for CSAM or adaptations to the drug dealing structure, thus the response has been insufficient to safeguard children (Caluori et al., 2020; ECPAT UK, 2020a; HM Government, 2020). Moreover, during this time the Education Secretary removed "65 legal safeguards" previously in place for looked after and

trafficked children that increased their vulnerabilities to further abuse (ECPAT UK, 2020b). The safeguards were disregarded by the Education Secretary to alleviate "minor bureaucratic burdens" during a time of national crisis (Richardson, 2020, n.p). The act of removing safeguards instead of strengthening them during a global pandemic has demonstrated the government's insufficient response to safeguarding vulnerable children. The removal of safeguards was later overturned by the Court of Appeal with the judge noting that there had been no reason for the safeguards to be 'scrapped' during the national crisis response (ECPAT UK, 2020b; Richardson, 2020).

The government's lack of appropriate response is further demonstrated in the delay of providing increased support to child trafficking survivors (Baker, 2020). The Independent Child Trafficking Guardians service which provides a specialised guardian for child survivors has only been fully implemented in limited parts of the country despite being mandated nationwide (Baker, 2020; ECPAT UK, 2020c). The effects of delaying this vital service have been heightened during the pandemic as many child victims of trafficking report an increase of trauma triggers as lockdowns prohibit their movement and services have been limited due to social distancing (Baker, 2020; ECPAT UK 2020c).

Addressing the exploitation of children and youth should remain a top priority in governmental response and funding allocation throughout the pandemic and during rebuilding efforts (Hoang and Wagner, 2020). The adaptations that have made the CL models more profitable are not expected to be discarded when the pandemic is declared 'over' (Caluori et al., 2020; Brewster et al., 2021). Further, the children exploited sexually online both in the UK and overseas at the hands of UK residents should be prioritised in rebuilding efforts to mitigate further exploitation (Wagner and Hoang, 2020). Various recommendations are included in the sources (n=53) that address CSE and CCE. These include prioritising online criminal justice presence, strengthening the safeguarding measures in place for vulnerable children, raising awareness to caregivers about online exploitation and safety, and streamlining the reporting process of suspected abuse of children (Wagner and Hoang 2020). These steps will assist in protecting the most vulnerable of our communities, whose risks have been multiplied due to the pandemic.

4.4 Gender-Based Violence and Sexual Exploitation

Women and female children are also at an increased risk during the pandemic due to the intersection of gender-specific vulnerabilities and the effects of the pandemic (Kotlyarenko et al., 2020; Wagner and Hoang, 2020). The UN reports a strong correlation between an increase of GBV and an increase of human trafficking, specifically sex trafficking, in an area following a disaster (Kotlyarenko et al., 2020; Obokata, 2020; Wagner and Hoang, 2020). Twenty-one data sources included in this scoping study highlight GBV during the pandemic.

GBV in the UK has already increased due to the pandemic, with calls to domestic abuse helplines doubling³ in the first three weeks of lockdown in March 2020 (Davy, 2020). The increase in GBV is attributed mainly to women being trapped at home with abusers during lockdown (FLEX, 2020; Kotlyarenko et al., 2020; Roesch et al., 2020; Speed et al., 2020; Obokata et al., 2021). Those who have multiple vulnerabilities such as female migrant workers, women already experiencing poverty, women previously engaged in sex work, and women belonging to an ethnic minority are at a heightened risk of GBV and sexual exploitation during the pandemic (FLEX, 2020; Kotlyarenko et al., 2020; Speed et al., 2020). It is important to note that men can also become victims of sexual exploitation. However, in 2020 women represented 90% of sexual exploitation referrals to the NRM (Home Office, 2021, n.p.).

3 Compared to March 2019

The data sources included in this scoping study highlight the risk to women over men, thus this section focuses specifically on the sexual exploitation of women.

Sisters not Strangers Coalition (2020) has reported an increase of women being forced to exchange “illegal work” for shelter and necessities by those in authority such as landlords (p. 5); however, referrals to the NRM for adult sexual exploitation dropped in 2020 (Balch et al., 2021). With lockdown and social distancing rules in place, reports estimate that this drop is not due to a lower number of adult victims of sexual exploitation. Instead, the drop in referrals reflects sex work and sexual exploitation moving from streets and brothels to inside homes and online (Wagner and Hoang, 2020; Balch et al., 2021). The exploitation has not ceased to exist but has become more difficult to identify.

Moving forward, the increased risk of violence and exploitation is expected to continue across the UK. Push factors including poverty, access to work, access to resources, and food poverty continue to multiply and affect those previously vulnerable at heightened levels (Rafferty, 2020; Speed et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020; Jimenez et al., 2021). It will be essential to increase funding for organisations and responses to GBV and assure access to in-person services for those without access to technology. Further, continuing to provide legal services, and moving forward with court cases against perpetrators of crime, will be essential in assuring an equitable future for those with a risk of exploitation due to gender (Speed et al., 2020; Jimenez et al., 2021; MSOICP, 2021; Obokata et al., 2021).

4.5 Migration

4.5.1 Increased Risks

The pandemic has had a significant impact on migration to the UK and will continue to have effects after the pandemic. Those seeking to migrate to the UK and current migrant workers are at heightened risk of exploitation through human trafficking (Freedom United, 2020). People seeking to migrate during the pandemic may engage with a people smuggler and pay to enter the country irregularly if regular migration channels such as work visas are unavailable due to travel restrictions (Smith and Cockayne, 2020; Yayboke, 2020; MSOICP, 2021). Utilising a people smuggler places migrants at increased risk of exploitation once they have arrived in their destination country (UNODC, 2019; UNODC, 2020; Freedom United, 2020). People smuggling and human trafficking are two separate crimes, with the former considered a crime against the state with the migrant willingly participating, and the latter a crime against an individual without the consent of the person (Stop the Traffik, 2017; UNODC, 2019). However, they can be interlinked as traffickers can pose as smugglers to prey on vulnerable migrants (Freedom United, 2020; UNODC, 2019; UNODC, 2020; Wagner and Hoang, 2020). Moreover, Kotlyarenko et al., (2020) state that “migrants have been identified as one of the main at-risk groups to [trafficking in human beings] during and after the COVID-19 pandemic” (p. 32). It is therefore essential to understand the impacts of the pandemic on migration and migrants in order to mitigate the effects and safeguard at-risk people.

Vulnerable migrant workers who were in the UK prior to lockdown have been further destabilised by the pandemic increasing their risk of exploitation (Anti-Slavery, 2020; Burco et al., 2021; Jimenez et al., 2021). Often, migrant workers rely on their employer not only for their income, but also visa support and housing (Anti-Slavery, 2020; La Strada International, 2020; Burco et al., 2021). Additionally, many migrant workers were made redundant when the first lockdown started (Burco et al., 2021; Jimenez et al., 2021). Thus, they lost their right to work legally in the UK, were forced out of their housing, and were unable to travel to their home country because of the travel restrictions (Anti-Slavery, 2020; La Strada International, 2020; Smith and Cockayne, 2020; Verite, 2020; Jimenez et al., 2021). The UK government acknowledged in a survey conducted by the UN that there

are no protections in place for workers housed without tenancy by their employer who are evicted during the pandemic (UN, 2020). This has left people homeless, desperate, and at high risk of exploitation by traffickers.

4.5.2 Long-term Risks

Long-term, the risk of exploitation for those seeking to migrate is expected to increase as governments may be reluctant to re-open borders post-pandemic (Yayboke, 2020; Burco et al., 2021). With little recourse for legal migration, and with ‘push’ factors for migration and modern slavery being multiplied across the globe, people will seek progressively risky ways to migrate, which in turn will increase the cost and the debt migrants are left in (UNODC, 2020; Yayboke, 2020; Burco et al., 2021; Schwarz et al., 2021a). Post-pandemic, the UN anticipates a sharp increase of migrants fleeing poor countries for developed nations due to job loss and poverty (UNODC, 2020). The UK will need to strengthen the protections for migrants to prevent exploitation from taking place.

4.5.3 Response

A strong governmental response is required to mitigate the increased risk of irregular migration resulting in human trafficking. As previously indicated, the governmental response has been insufficient particularly in terms of adapting to COVID-19. It is critical for the government to respond by strengthening inspections to assist in identifying vulnerable workers (Burco et al., 2021), waiving the application fee for permits to work in demand jobs to decrease chance of risky migration, and continuing to prioritise the issue of modern slavery and people smuggling in the rebuilding efforts post-pandemic (Freedom United, 2020; Verite, 2020; Jimenez et al., 2021). Consequently, the UK government will be able to assist in mitigating the risks to migrants who were already vulnerable.

4.6 Supply Chains and Labor Exploitation

4.6.1 Increased Risk of Exploitation

Many migrants who agree to be smuggled to the UK do so out of desperation and become indebted to their smugglers and in turn are exploited for labor to repay their debts (UNODC, 2020). Adult victims were most frequently referred to the NRM for labor exploitation in 2020 (Burco et al., 2021; Schwarz et al., 2021a). Labor exploitation accounted for 21% of all referrals and 32% of adult referrals to the NRM in 2020 (Home Office, 2021, p. 5). Additionally, the global supply chain has faced extreme demand throughout the pandemic and regular supply channels have been interrupted (Trautrimis et al., 2020; Schwarz et al., 2021a). These changes in demand and availability of supply have further increased the risks for forced labor and labor trafficking throughout the UK as companies attempt to rapidly increase production (Feinmann, 2020; Griffith, 2020). Changes to supply chains were reported by 25 sources and the increased risk and changes to labor exploitation was noted by 44 sources.

Issues surrounding supply chain changes and potential increases in labor exploitation are vast and complex. Increased vulnerabilities from the pandemic are particularly troubling for those in domestic work, adult social care, and agriculture (Griffith, 2020). Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX) (2020) reports issues around key workers being denied proper personal protective equipment (PPE), having paid sick time denied, and being ineligible for governmental assistance due to exploitative contracts that do not appropriately name full time employees. The data sources note that workers who were at highest risk prior to the pandemic are at further risk of labor exploitation due to their vulnerabilities having increased.

4.6.2 Response

A combination of the pandemic and the European Union (EU) Referendum in 2016 has shifted the government's priority away from safe monitoring of supply chains and working conditions. Instead, the focus has become ensuring that the agricultural sector has enough workers for food production, and the NHS has access to the medical equipment that is needed (Lerigo-Stephens and Trautrim, 2020; Burco et al., 2021). The UK left the EU through the EU Referendum which has impacted the flow of seasonal workers from mainland Europe to farms in the UK (Lerigo-Stephens and Trautrim, 2020; Burco et al., 2021). In the UK, 98% of the seasonal food sector workforce was recruited outside of the UK prior to the EU Referendum (Lerigo-Stephens and Trautrim, 2020, p. 2). However, due to the EU Referendum and resulting immigration changes, there are now limits on how many workers can receive work visas to enter the UK during harvest season (Lerigo-Stephens and Trautrim, 2020; Burco et al., 2021). The decrease in foreign workers has not been replaced by an increase of UK workers willing to work in the food sector resulting in a shortage of workers (ibid). The pandemic has further impacted the flow of workers as travel restrictions have been imposed. In response, Schwarz et al., (2021a) report that the UK Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) "loosened restrictions and introduced a temporary licence scheme to facilitate the supply of workers for food production" (p.5). By doing this, the GLAA reduced oversight in crucial areas of production that are at high risk of exploitation such as on farms (Trautrim et al., 2020; Schwarz et al., 2021a).

Under section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act (MSA) (2015), companies that operate in the UK and produce at least £36 million in profits each year must publicise an annual modern slavery statement (Schaper and Pollach, 2021). The modern slavery statement should address the presence of modern slavery and labor exploitation in the company's supply chain and how the company is addressing any problem areas. The UK government has delayed necessary reporting on supply chains for six months due to increased demand for products during the pandemic (Pinnington et al., 2021). Companies have manipulated this system to produce in demand items quickly and often using exploitative practices (ibid). This is true not only of companies producing items in the UK, but also items purchased for UK consumption. An example of this practice is the relaxation of rules surrounding medical glove supply from Malaysia for the NHS. Workers in these glove factories had experienced working hours up to 18 hours a day under unsafe conditions without access to PPE or breaks to meet global demand for medical gloves, including for the NHS (Feinmann, 2020; Bhutta et al., 2021). Relaxed rules within the UK have a global effect, as demonstrated in Malaysia, and this international impact should be accounted for when making decisions and structuring regulations in the rebuilding phase of the pandemic.

4.7 Changes in Victim Identification and Survivor Services

4.7.1 Victim Identification

Over half of the included data sources report on how the pandemic impacts victim identification and survivor services (n=73). Fewer victims are being identified during the pandemic as in-person interactions with vulnerable people are limited during lockdown (Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, 2020; Hoffman et al., 2020; Hope for Justice, 2020; IOM, 2020a; IOM, 2020b; Smith and Cockayne, 2020). This is true for victims of multiple types of modern slavery as discussed above.

Moreover, there has been a shift in the number of victims identified from the top three source countries- the UK, Albania, and Vietnam. In 2020, the UK nationals identified increased to 35% of total referrals (from 27% in 2019), Albanian nationals represented 15% (decreased from 16%), and Vietnamese nationals comprised 6% of referrals (decreased 8%) (Home

Office, 2021, p. 6). The increase in UK nationals is credited to traffickers targeting British nationals and survivors in the UK due to the inability to transport victims from abroad because of travel restrictions (Roberts, 2020; Jimenez et al., 2021).

As previously discussed, the NRM data demonstrates the lack of identification through fewer victims referred to the NRM in 2020 (n=10,613) than 2019 (n=10,627) (Home Office, 2021, p.1). This is the first time a lower number than the previous year has been reported since the inception of the NRM. The drop in reporting is attributed to the pandemic and resulting difficulties noted above, not due to less victims being in the UK. Additionally, the government's lack of attention on modern slavery as it focuses on COVID-19 is cited as a contributing factor (Hope for Justice, 2020; IOM, 2020a; Newson, 2020).

4.7.2 Survivor Services

Survivors of modern slavery have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic according to the literature. The impacts to survivors are attributed to service funding being diverted during the pandemic (Hope for Justice, 2020), political focus and will being moved away from modern slavery survivors, and services being moved online because of lockdown (IOM, 2020a; Smith and Cockayne, 2020; Jimenez et al., 2021). Survivors often lack access to technology such as cell phones with data plans or wifi. This inhibits their ability to utilise support services moved online, including counseling and meetings with solicitors (Unseen, 2020a; Unseen, 2020b; Garbers et al., 2021). Further, survivors have experienced increased Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms as restrictions on movement due to lockdown have triggered survivors who experienced similar restrictions while being exploited (Adavu, 2020; Smith, 2020; Unseen, 2020a). The organisation Adavu (2020) reports that during lockdown they have "observed a significant deterioration of the mental health of many of our clients" (n.p.). Further, they note that one client attempted suicide during lockdown which had not happened within the organisation pre-pandemic (Adavu, 2020).

Survivors who are also asylum seekers are at even higher risk of exploitation due to their heightened vulnerabilities pre-pandemic, and their inability to work to better their situation (Dexter, 2020; Yayboke, 2020). Moreover, asylum seekers receive a weekly allocation of only £35 from the government (Dexter, 2020, p.1). These survivors report difficulty obtaining food for their families during the pandemic due to the card they receive only working in select places that were often sold out of food during this time (Dexter, 2020; Helen Bamber Foundation, 2020; Jimenez et al., 2021).

The *Helen Bamber Foundation* (2020) reports that all survivors are highly vulnerable to being re-exploited for the first three years after entering the NRM. During the pandemic, these risks have been magnified by decreased face-to-face services and support available during the pandemic (HBF, 2020; IOM, 2020a). Without proper support, survivors fear they will be targeted by their former exploiters (Anti-slavery International, 2020; Hope for Justice, 2020; IOM, 2020a; Jimenez et al., 2021). These fears are valid as traffickers in the UK are specifically targeting survivors as previously discussed. This places survivors at higher risk of re-exploitation and necessitates a strong governmental and NGO response to increase access to services and provide the support survivors need.

4.7.3 Response

The responses to these heightened risks have taken place in small measures (Jimenez et al., 2021). When lockdowns began in 2020, the Home Office initially extended the allotted time for NRM referrals to stay in government funded accommodation to three months past the standard 45-day allowance. All stays were then extended until August 2021 in response to the continuation of the pandemic (Home Office and Atkins, 2020; Newson, 2020). The Scottish government increased this further to allow all individuals referred to the NRM an indefinite

stay in supported housing while pandemic related restrictions are in place (Jimenez et al., 2021). Moreover, the Scottish government also increased government funding for the organisation *Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance* by 26%, and assistance to *Migrant Help* by 40% to meet the increasing accommodation and capacity needs (Jimenez et al., 2021, p.33).

The response to the inability to access services online has been limited (Garbers et al., 2021). Some organisations have been able to apply for grants or redirect their own funding to purchase cell phones and data plans for survivors. However, others have only reported a lack of governmental response and stated that promised devices from the government did not arrive (Garbers et al., 2021; Jimenez et al., 2021). Addressing basic needs in the 21st century must include addressing digital poverty. Survivors will continue to be at heightened risk of re-exploitation without proper support and will remain vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic.

5. Recommendations for Future Research

This study sought to answer the question, “What are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on modern slavery in the UK?”. This section evaluates the findings to identify research gaps and make suggestions for future research. Scoping studies do not assess the quality of data included, and grey literature is relied upon for emerging topics, such as the pandemic (Peters et al., 2020). Therefore, this study is best positioned to make suggestions for future research and not suited for suggestions in policy (ibid).

Scoping studies are limited by the data available (Peters et al., 2020), and current data does not specifically address increased vulnerabilities based on racial or ethnic identity in the UK. When evaluating the pandemic through the theory of intersectionality, those from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities in the UK were at a heightened risk of modern slavery pre-pandemic, and those same communities have been heavily affected by the general impacts of the pandemic (Office for National Statistics, 2020; Jimenez et al., 2021). Thus, the lack of literature addressing the increased vulnerabilities to modern slavery for BAME communities because of the pandemic is a significant data gap and further research is needed in this area. Additionally, the UK BME Anti-Slavery Network (2021) has recommended that the NRM should track “ethnicity data to ensure equitable treatment and decision-making for ALL [sic] victims/survivors” (p. 11). Ethnicity data would also be beneficial for quantifying changes in victim identification in BAME populations moving forward in the pandemic.

Moreover, while attempts were made to include sources and data from across all four countries in the UK, most data originated in England. These sources listed a primary focus of the UK as a whole; however, they primarily focused on organisations and survivors’ stories located in England, and specifically London. Future research that focuses on gathering data from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and areas of England outside of London would be beneficial for a holistic understanding of the effects in the UK.

As a vulnerable group exploited during the pandemic, children require additional online safeguarding by guardians and schools to protect against CSE and CCE. Further research would be beneficial to measure the risk of CSE to children overseas by UK offenders and to monitor the amount of CSAM accessed within the UK. Additionally, changes to the CL structure are expected to be sustained and continue to evolve. Further research would assist in identifying new changes to the OCGs and identifying best practice to safeguard children in metropolitan and rural areas. The sources noted that children missing from metropolitan areas have been missing for longer lengths of time, however no data quantified this increased length. Understanding this increased time through additional research would be beneficial for better understanding of adaptations to the CL model.

Further, the literature included in this scoping review focuses heavily on increases to sexual exploitation of women but does not address any impacts to sexual exploitation of men. Research exploring this topic could assist in identifying male victims of sexual exploitation during the pandemic and ensuring equitable treatment for all survivors.

With ‘push’ factors such as poverty increasing across the globe, and the UK borders closed to many migrants, there is a heightened risk of people smuggling into the nation which in turn increases the risk of exploitation. Further research into the effects of the pandemic on ‘push’ factors in countries where victims in the UK mainly originate from would be beneficial in anticipating changes in migration and adapting responses.

Finally, the NRM data should continue to be evaluated each quarter to monitor the rates of victim identification during rebuilding. Research that monitors the long-term effects on victim identification and access to survivor care is essential for the UK government and NGO organisations to adapt responses and provide equitable care.

Conclusion

This scoping study has established that the pandemic has impacted modern slavery in the United Kingdom largely in a negative way. The primary effect identified by the 134 included data sources is the increased vulnerabilities of those already vulnerable to modern slavery prior to the pandemic. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will be felt for years and will continue to increase the vulnerabilities of those who were already at a heightened risk of exploitation. To prevent an increase in modern slavery these vulnerabilities must be addressed with long-term solutions to ending poverty, safeguarding children, supporting survivors, and increasing the identification of victims. Additional research into each of these areas is necessary to continue evaluating the existing effects of the pandemic and new impacts. The criminal structures that thrive on the vulnerabilities of others have adapted quickly to the pandemic to maintain business profits. The UK government and NGOs need to respond with this same level of focus and adaptation, with a long-term goal of empowering and strengthening vulnerable individuals and communities to safeguard against modern slavery.

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