

Debate: Tenth anniversary of the Modern Slavery Act, 27 March 2025

Improving criminal justice outcomes

The Modern Slavery Act 2015 was a significant step forward in the fight against modern slavery. However, modern slavery remains a low risk—high reward crime with criminals continuing to abuse victims with impunity. Bringing offenders to justice is essential to breaking the business-model of organised crime groups, bringing individual victims a sense of justice and preventing more people becoming victims of exploitation.

1. Prosecution and conviction rates remain stubbornly low

- In 2023 the Home Affairs Select Committee concluded *“The high number of referrals into the National Referral Mechanism and the number of live investigations together highlight the ability to identify human trafficking and exploitation that occurs in the UK. These cases are resource-intensive and potentially complex; however, the low prosecution rates are unacceptable.”*¹
- In 2023, court data for England and Wales shows there were 337 prosecutions and 209 convictions for modern slavery offences on an all-offence basis (where modern slavery is charged as a principal offence or alongside another principal offence.)² Only 82 defendants were prosecuted and 59 convicted for modern slavery on a principal offence basis.³ In comparison, in the same year there were more than 8,056 NRM referrals sent to police in England or Wales for investigation where the reported exploitation took place in the UK.⁴

2. Modern slavery must be a policing priority with specialist resources available

- The Home Affairs Select Committee described a *“de-prioritisation of human trafficking in favour of attention on irregular migration”* in Government policy over recent years. In policing, modern slavery has also been combined with organised immigration crime with the Committee expressing concern *“that the NCA may be prioritising immigration issues at the expense of investigating human trafficking and recovering victims,”* especially the thousands of British victims.⁵
- Our own research⁶ echoes evidence heard by the Committee from the former Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner and the National Policing Lead that there are *“better results’ and more successful prosecutions if there were dedicated teams of experts working on an investigation”* and recommended that every police force should have a dedicated specialist team. The House of Lords Committee on the Modern Slavery Act last October also recommended greater availability of specialist financial investigators which can provide evidence vital to securing convictions and to recovering criminals’ assets so victims can be compensated.
- Modern slavery investigations may be complex, but they are not impossible. The Lord’s Committee noted *“Gathering the evidence required for successful prosecution of modern slavery offences is known to be challenging but there are established methods of doing it”*.⁷
- **We recommend a cross-departmental modern slavery strategy including a coordinated criminal justice response with guidance and strategic direction for police forces including (but not only) increasing the number of specialist investigation teams across all police forces.**

3. Victim testimony is vital– but they need to be supported

- Survivors hold the key to achieving successful prosecutions — in most cases victim testimony remains central to building a case against offenders and even identifying other victims. Our research and frontline work show it is support that enables victims to engage with prosecutions.⁸
- Justice and Care’s unique Victim Navigator programme is proven to enable more victims to participate in criminal investigations (92% of victims supported engage with investigations,

compared to 44% without a Navigator). These independent specialist support workers embedded with law enforcement act as a trusted bridge between investigators and victims of modern slavery and broker support from external services according to individual victims' needs.

- Our most recent data shows (February 2025):
 - Specialist strategic advice provided into 1,506 investigations.
 - 687 survivors supported, with multiple support needs met per survivor.
 - 131 victims freed directly due to VN involvement.
 - Average 80% survivors show improved overall recovery and wellbeing.
 - Supported survivors through 38 court cases that have resulted in judgement, 37 of which led to convictions (97%).
 - 64 convictions secured (for modern slavery and other charges) with 304 years in combined sentencing given to the perpetrators. In all of these cases, Navigators were crucial in maintaining the engagement of survivors, whose evidence, testimony or ongoing cooperation contributed to the conviction (additional convictions have also been achieved).
- The programme has been endorsed by leaders at the National Police Chiefs Council and the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority⁹ and a full national roll out recommended by both the Home Affairs Select Committee and the Lord's MSA Committee.
- **We welcome the engagement we have had with the Home Office about how to expand the Victim Navigator programme and we recommend each police force has access to a specialist Victim Navigator to support modern slavery victims through the criminal justice process.**

4. Slavery and Trafficking Prevention and Risk Orders need to be more widely used

- Alongside criminal sanctions the MSA introduced civil orders Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Orders (STPOs) that can be imposed on offenders on conviction and Risk Orders (STROs) available by application to the court. These orders have the potential to play a key role in protecting current or future victims and preventing offenders from continuing profit through modern slavery.
- Research in 2022 found STPOs are imposed in less than one third of modern slavery convictions.¹⁰
- As STPOs can only be imposed following specific modern slavery offences, low prosecution rates for these offences further impacts the availability of these orders. Plans were announced to strengthen this legislation in 2022 and it is disappointing this has not yet happened.
- **We recommend STPOs should be mandatory on conviction for modern slavery offences and also available on acquittal or on conviction for other related offences where exploitation is indicated as well as making it easier to apply for orders across a police force boundaries.¹¹**

For briefings on other aspects of modern slavery or more information contact:

Louise Gleich, Policy Research and Advocacy Lead: louise.gleich@justiceandcare.org

¹ [House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, *Human Trafficking, HC 124, December 2023*](#)

² [Ministry of Justice, *Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: December 2023 All Offence Prosecutions and Convictions data tool \(May 2024\)*](#)

³ [Ministry of Justice, *Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly: December 2022 Outcomes by Offence data tool \(May 2024\)*](#)

⁴ Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics End of Year 2023, March 2024, Data Table 3

⁵ [House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, *Human Trafficking, HC 124, December 2023*](#)

⁶ [Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, *A path to freedom and justice: a new vision for supporting victims of modern slavery*, February 2022](#)

⁷ [House of Lords Modern Slavery Act 2015 Committee, *The Modern Slavery Act 2015: becoming world-leading again, HL Paper 8, October 2024*](#)

⁸ [Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, *Slavery at Home*, February 2023; Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, *A path to freedom and justice: a new vision for supporting victims of modern slavery*, February 2022; Justice and Care, *Victim Navigator Pilot Final Evaluation: From victim to witness to survivor*, November 2022](#)

⁹ [House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, *Human Trafficking, HC 124, December 2023*](#)

¹⁰ [Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, *The use of modern slavery risk and prevention orders*, March 2022](#)

¹¹ [Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, *A renewed vision for the fight against modern slavery in the UK: a programme for government*, May 2024; Centre for Social Justice and Justice and Care, *Slavery at Home*, February 2023](#)