

# UK government 'misleading public' about modern slavery, new research claims

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Experts from the University of Manchester have claimed that the government is misleading the public by claiming that modern slavery can be eradicated by toughening up border controls and extending sentence

lengths for offenders.

Modern slavery refers broadly to crimes of exploitation—usually committed for commercial gain—and includes [sexual exploitation](#), domestic servitude, labor exploitation and "county lines" drug trafficking.

For much of the last decade, the government has claimed that modern slavery is hiding in [plain sight](#)—everywhere, yet imperceptible—and requires the most urgent of action. Ministers committed to ramp up the so-called "hostile environment" to tackle something they implied was perpetrated by foreign criminals who were orchestrating international organized crime networks and making vast sums of money.

However, that same hostile environment has made undocumented migrant workers' lives much more precarious, as they are the people who are most prone to exploitation by criminals—they have little choice but to work "cash-in-hand" in the gray economy.

Researchers from the University of Manchester wanted to find out who these modern slavery offenders are, how their situations led to them becoming tangled up in criminality, and what might be done to reduce the prevalence of such exploitation. They were able to conduct interviews with 30 offenders who had been convicted of modern slavery offenses in the UK, 16 of whom were British citizens.

They found that many of the people they spoke to had long histories of trauma, migration and victimization which had led them into exploitative relationships, debts and dependencies. These situations had ultimately caused them to become involved in the exploitation of others. Others had worked in legitimate businesses and had never been involved in crime before.

Many had escaped dire situations themselves and were trying to raise money to send to their families in countries with few [work opportunities](#) where poverty and instability are rife. All but one of the women had dependent children or elderly relatives who they supported financially.

Some participants had helped smuggle people into the UK; for some this was unintentional, and others had done it as a favor to friends. A couple did it to make "easy money," but those participants—both of whom were white British nationals—had lengthier criminal histories and were the exception amongst the interviewees.

The researchers claim that many of the causes of modern slavery could be alleviated by providing a more hospitable environment for new arrivals. They say that if people are able to work for at least a legal minimum wage and aren't so afraid of deportation that they can't speak to [law enforcement](#), if they know their rights and if they can access decent housing and healthcare, they would not become reliant on favors from people operating outside the law.

"Our research has shown that we are deceiving ourselves by thinking that modern slavery can be eradicated by toughening up [border controls](#) and extending sentence lengths for convicted offenders. Instead, we need to face up to the complexities that lead to some people being convicted of people trafficking and smuggling offenses. We need to ask why these kinds of exploitation are persisting, despite a decade of efforts to out-police modern slavery," says Senior Criminology Lecturer Dr. Rose Broad.

"Recognizing the rights of children, migrants and sex workers would protect many from the horrors of [modern slavery](#)," said Professor of Criminology David Gadd. "The perpetrators often come from these vulnerable groups as well, but they are not a homogenous group. Their motives for exploiting others are varied, and can even be morally

comprehensible if one pays attention to the complexity of the difficulties they have faced throughout their lives. Their stories can reveal unpalatable truths about the world we live in."

**More information:** Perpetrators of Modern Slavery:  
[sites.manchester.ac.uk/perpetrators-of-modern-slavery/](https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/perpetrators-of-modern-slavery/)

Provided by University of Manchester

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