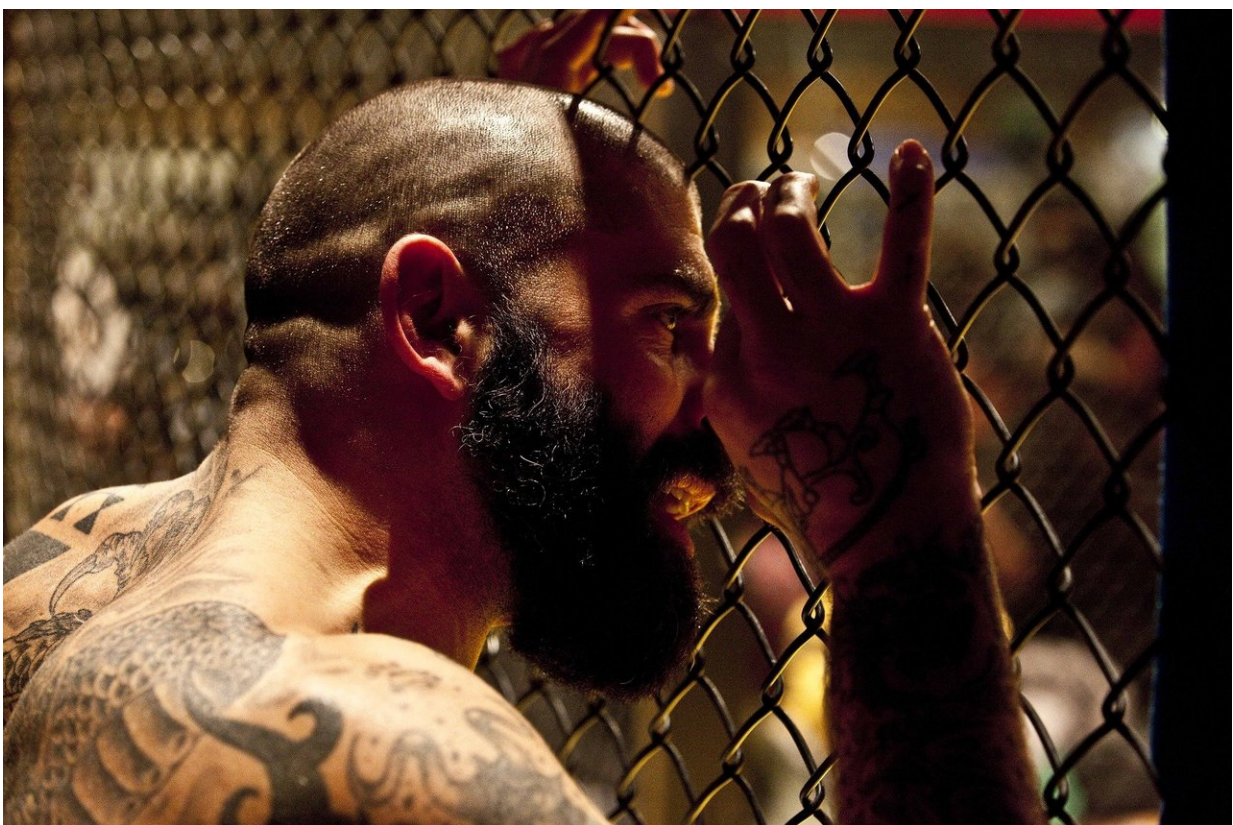


# We don't know how many victims of modern slavery are in prison—why that's a problem in the UK

December 1 2023, by Marija Jovanovic

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Modern slavery affects [an estimated 120,000](#) people in the UK. Under [international law](#), countries must identify and protect survivors, while

prosecuting and punishing those who traffic and exploit them.

Courts in England and Wales convicted 282 traffickers in [2022](#). But many victims of [modern slavery](#) also end up imprisoned, often for [criminal activity](#) they are forced to commit as part of their exploitation.

And here is the problem: we don't actually know how many victims of modern slavery have been imprisoned. There are no official statistics.

My colleagues and I have spoken to dozens of [prison staff](#), who say it is highly likely that unidentified [survivors](#) of modern slavery are currently being imprisoned across the UK. Our [new report explains](#) how difficult it is for prison authorities to identify and report people who they suspect may have experienced modern slavery.

It was only in 2022 that prisons introduced the role of Modern Slavery Single Points of Contact (Spocs), whose job it is to improve the ability of prisons to identify and support survivors. My colleagues and I surveyed 50 out of the 117 Spocs in UK prisons. More than two-thirds thought it highly likely that there were unidentified survivors of modern slavery in their prisons.

We also spoke to modern slavery survivors, the charities who support them and other experts. A [forensic psychologist](#) we interviewed said they believe the number of modern slavery survivors in prison is "increasing exponentially".

## **How the UK tracks modern slavery**

Survivors of modern slavery in the UK are identified through the [national referral mechanism](#). In 2022, [nearly 3,000](#) people were formally recognized as victims through this system.

Once someone is identified, they are legally [entitled to support](#) from the government such as safe accommodation, mental health support, access to [legal advice](#) and protection from further exploitation. This is true even if they are in prison.

However, only designated "first responder organizations" are able to refer suspected cases of modern slavery to the national referral mechanism. These include the Home Office, police and a number of modern slavery charities—but not prisons.

This means that, if a prison officer (or a Spoc) suspects that someone is a victim of modern slavery, they need to ask a third party to interview the person and make a formal referral. This causes significant delays and hinders access to support.

And a lack of information-sharing between the national referral mechanism and prisons means that prisons often do not know whether how many survivors are among their population.

It can take years for victims to come forward and report themselves. One survivor we interviewed said, "When I was inside no one wanted to listen, for so long no one wanted to listen, for so many years I was too scared to talk."

## **Further exploitation in prison**

Modern slavery survivors may end up in prison following criminal exploitation—convicted of crimes they are forced to commit, such as drug trafficking. Others may commit offenses unrelated to their experience of modern slavery. While they may be rightly convicted and imprisoned, they are still entitled to victim support.

But because so many remain unidentified in prison, they do not receive

this support. Rather, many are at risk of being exploited further, including after they are released. Even if survivors are identified, prisons are often not equipped to provide mental health support for the [complex needs](#) of people who have experienced modern slavery.

Survivors and experts we interviewed consistently described how the prison environment could replicate the dynamic of modern slavery experiences. A forensic psychologist we interviewed explained: "The experience of being locked up, the experience of being controlled by people, absolutely parallels the entrapment that they experienced within their trafficking."

Overcrowding may mean that survivors cannot be moved to a safe environment. Some of the prison staff we spoke to said that victims may even be imprisoned with their traffickers.

Prison staff told us how [vulnerable people](#) in prison are exploited through gang activity. They may be forced to participate in [illegal activity](#) such as selling mobile phones or drug distribution and are often [exploited further through debt](#) they incur in prisons.

And once they are due to be released, the absence of communication with the organizations that support modern slavery survivors may put them at risk of being re-trafficked. As one former member of prison staff described: "The gates open, they walk out ... exploiters would meet them at gates."

The prison service in England and Wales introduced [modern slavery guidance](#) in 2022, laying out for prison staff how to identify and respond to suspected modern slavery.

While this, and the addition of Spocs, is a welcome effort, it highlights the gaps in the UK's approach to the issue. Similar guidance does not

exist for prisons in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and there is no international guidance or models in other countries to turn to.

Our findings suggest that there is still a huge blind spot in identifying and supporting some of the most vulnerable people in the prison system. Ultimately, countries need to step up their efforts in punishing the traffickers, not their victims.

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