

# 'Underworked' victims of modern slavery endure extra exploitation

16 July 2018

People trapped in modern slavery can be 'underworked' by ruthless employers, to increase their debt bondage and provide revenue from living costs.

The assumption that [victims](#) of [exploitation](#) are worked like 'slaves' is shielding extra layers of exploitation, shows research led by the University of Bath's School of Management, published by the Academy of Management.

The study of the food and construction sectors in the UK found that far from being worked as hard as they can, victims can sometimes be given no work for several weeks, or only a few hours a week.

Gangmasters take on more workers than they need and deliberately avoid giving victims work. They provide them with accommodation and money for food, on the proviso it is paid back when they start earning; cultivating dependence and debt bondage, most common among migrant workers in the agricultural sector.

Victims become 'coerced consumers', forced into spend wages on accommodation, food, transport and other goods provided by their employer. They are driven deeper into debt, securing funds from family members abroad, or instant loan services.

In other cases, workers will accumulate large amounts of debt, usually with undisclosed premium interest rates, that they cannot repay. They are pushed further into financial dependence and become increasingly susceptible to continued exploitation.

Professor Andrew Crane, from the University of Bath's Centre for Business, Organisations and Society, said: "At first, the idea of the victims of modern [slavery](#) being 'underworked' perplexed us. Why would you coerce workers into a situation of forced labour if you were not going to work them as

hard as you could? The explanation is that victims are being mercilessly forced into a cycle of [debt](#) and exploitation that is extremely difficult to break.

"This research shines a light on the sinister mechanics of how businesses that deploy slavery operate. We think of business innovation as being to the benefit of the environment and society but here is the dark side of business innovation, highlighting the warped business logic of those who profit from exploitation.

The UK government estimates there are tens of thousands of people in slavery in Britain today. In 2017 over 5,000 people were referred to British authorities as potential victims of slavery, an increase of a third from 2016.

Previous research by Professor Crane showed that a failure to monitor outsourced recruitment is resulting in companies inadvertently employing victims of modern slavery. Interviews with experts in [business](#), NGOs, trade unions, law firms and the police showed that while companies can increasingly trace where their products come from, many are in the dark about the backgrounds of their staff.

**More information:** Andrew Crane et al, Innovations in the Business Models of Modern Slavery: The Dark Side of Business Model Innovation, *Academy of Management Proceedings* (2018). [DOI: 10.5465/AMBPP.2018.189](https://doi.org/10.5465/AMBPP.2018.189)

Provided by University of Bath

APA citation: 'Underworked' victims of modern slavery endure extra exploitation (2018, July 16) retrieved 15 October 2019 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-07-underworked-victims-modern-slavery-extra.html>

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