

Article

# Sourcing data on child victims of modern slavery, UK: progress report

An update on sourcing suitable data for Sustainable Development Goal indicators relating to modern slavery and children in the UK.

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Release date:  
29 March 2022

Next release:  
To be announced

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# 1 . Overview of modern slavery

Modern slavery is an umbrella term for all forms of slavery, human trafficking and exploitation. It can take many forms including trafficking of people, forced labour and servitude. It is a crime that is committed across the UK and affects some of the most vulnerable in society, including children. Victims are often hidden away, may be unable to leave their situation, or may not come forward because of fear or shame.

Because of its hidden nature, producing an accurate measure of prevalence is difficult. Currently, there is no definitive source of data or suitable method available to accurately quantify the number of victims of modern slavery in the UK. However, measuring and monitoring the prevalence of modern slavery over time is important in assessing its scale and the effectiveness of policies to stop or prevent it, as well as highlighting the resources needed to support the victims involved.

This article outlines our research to source data that measures the number of child victims of modern slavery, a key evidence gap across the UK and a requirement of two [Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) indicators](#).

We identified the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) as the current most suitable data source to measure the number of child victims of modern slavery in the UK. However, we acknowledge its limitations, which prevent it from providing the complete picture. Reviewing other data sources in conjunction can help provide additional insight into the extent of child modern slavery in the UK and is the best way to inform policy and design support provisions for victims.

For information and data on child victims of modern slavery see the accompanying bulletin [Child victims of modern slavery in the UK: March 2022](#). For information and data on adult victims of modern slavery see the publication [Modern slavery in the UK: March 2020](#).

## 2 . Sustainable Development Goals

In 2015, the UN General Assembly launched the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), a set of 17 ambitious goals and supporting targets to achieve by 2030. The goals are universal, for all countries and people, and are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future. They address the global challenges we face, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice.

Each goal consists of targets and, within these, indicators for which each country must report data. In the UK, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has the responsibility for sourcing and reporting data to feed into the global monitoring and reporting process. The ONS Centre for Crime and Justice and the ONS SDG team work collaboratively to obtain data for crime-related SDG indicators, which are published on the [SDG](#) data site.

Within this article we cover two modern slavery-related SDG indicators: 8.7.1 and 16.2.2.

## Indicators 8.7.1 and 16.2.2

Within [goal 8](#) of the SDGs is target 8.7: take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms. This target is measured by indicator 8.7.1:

Proportion and number of children aged 5 to 17 years engaged in child labour, by sex and age.

Within [goal 16](#) of the SDGs is target 16.2: end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children. This target is measured by three indicators including indicator 16.2.2:

Number of victims of human trafficking per 100,000 population, by sex, age and form of exploitation.

Our task was to source the most suitable data for indicators 8.7.1 and 16.2.2. When sourcing data for SDG indicators, we must keep in mind the requirement to disaggregate these data by as many key variables as possible, including age, sex, geography, disability, migratory status, income and ethnicity. This is part of the UK's commitment to the [Inclusive Data Charter](#) to accurately describe all populations by a range of characteristics, in line with the UN's principle of "[leave no one behind](#)". It also ensures statistics are inclusive and reflective of everyone in society, in line with the [UK Statistics' Authority Public Good Strategy](#).

As there is no definitive data source in the UK that estimates the prevalence of modern slavery, we sought to ascertain the most suitable source that could act as a "proxy" measure for each indicator.

## 3 . Method of sourcing data

To source data for the two modern slavery-related Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators, we began contacting stakeholders working in modern slavery research, as well as victim support services. We used their expertise and professional opinion to help identify potential data sources and understand the key caveats, particularly related to data quality.

Working with victim support services was an important part of this work as they were able to provide valuable insight into the services and tools they offer and the practicality of how their data sources work. Throughout this process we explored a range of different data, from government sources (for example the [National Referral Mechanism](#) and the [Department for Education's Children in Need Census](#)), police recorded crime data, and data from charities and private organisations (for example [NSPCC](#), [Unseen](#), [Catch22](#), [STOP THE TRAFFIK](#), and the [Traffik Analysis Hub](#)).

After collating the information on available data sources, we considered how well each source met our key criteria for measuring indicators 8.7.1 and 16.2.2. Some of the criteria we considered when evaluating the data sources were:

- relevance and available data disaggregations
- accuracy of data reporting and recording practices
- disclosure risk of publishing data
- geographical coverage
- availability and comparability of data over time
- regularity, timeliness and consistency of future data releases

We then worked with the SDG team to analyse the information and agree on the most suitable data source. The chosen data source was assessed as having the fewest data limitations, could be disaggregated as required for the indicators, was consistently collected and published, and was easily accessible.

## 4 . Recommendation

Following our research into available data sources on child victims of modern slavery, we proposed the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), collected by the Home Office, as the most suitable data source currently available for both indicators 8.7.1 and 16.2.2.

The NRM is a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and human trafficking in the UK. It aims to ensure that victims receive appropriate protection and support. Potential child victims of modern slavery are identified and then referred to the NRM by [first responder organisations](#) (for example, police forces, local authorities and certain charity organisations). As modern slavery is a hidden crime, not all victims will come to the attention of first responders and so the NRM only provides a partial picture of the true number of victims. For more information on the NRM, including its limitations, see the accompanying bulletin [Child victims of modern slavery in the UK: March 2022](#).

The [NRM statistics](#) are published in a timely and consistent manner meaning both indicators can be continually and readily updated, and a timeseries can be produced.

Within routinely published [NRM data tables](#), data is presented for adults (those over the age of 18 years) and minors (those under the age of 18 years). To fulfil SDG indicators 8.7.1 and 16.2.2 we needed data for minors disaggregated further into age-bands, and so this was specifically requested for this task. The age-bands provided were: 0 to 14 years; 15 to 17 years; and age not specified or unknown.

For [indicator 8.7.1](#) (proportion and number of children aged 5 to 17 years engaged in child labour, by sex and age) we obtained NRM data on the number of potential victims of labour exploitation who are minors (under the age of 18 years).

For [indicator 16.2.2](#) (number of victims of human trafficking per 100,000 population, by sex, age and form of exploitation) we obtained NRM data on the number of potential victims of modern slavery, for all exploitation types, by age at time of exploitation, and sex. The NRM has data on the nationality of potential victims of modern slavery, as well as whether the potential victim was exploited in the UK or overseas (or both). That said, the NRM does not differentiate between cases of modern slavery and human trafficking within its data. Consequently, data presented for indicator 16.2.2 will capture both modern slavery and human trafficking. Further to this, as the overall number of victims who are illegally trafficked into the UK is unknown, it is not possible to calculate population rates, and so this part of the indicator cannot currently be fulfilled.

Both indicator 8.7.1 and 16.2.2 will use NRM data on the number of potential victims of modern slavery who are identified and referred by [first responder organisations](#).

## 5 . Future developments

While acknowledging its caveats and limitations, we have recommended the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) as the best available data source for providing information on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators 8.7.1 and 16.2.2.

The Home Office has continued to work with [first responder organisations](#) over the past year to strengthen the tools and resources available to them, and to help them engage more actively with the NRM (as noted within the [2021 UK Annual Report on Modern Slavery](#)). This work should increase the number of referrals and therefore the likelihood that child victims of modern slavery will be identified and recorded, ensuring that the NRM continues to be a suitable data source for SDG indicators 8.7.1 and 16.2.2 for the foreseeable future.

While we have recommended the NRM, we acknowledge its limitations for this task and that, because of the hidden nature of this crime, the data will most likely be an undercount of the true number of victims. Our research has demonstrated that other data sources provide useful additional insight into the extent of the crime and that viewing these alongside the NRM is the best way to inform policy and design support provisions for child victims of modern slavery in the UK.

As one of the first countries to supply data for SDG indicators 8.7.1 and 16.2.2, we will continue to be world-leading in the promotion of radical and sustainable research to fulfil the reporting requirements of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. We will also continue to review the available data sources for recording and estimating child victims of modern slavery and will reassess the recommendation to the SDG team if deemed necessary.

Finally, we are undertaking a review of the Children's Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) and liaising with stakeholders across government, academia and the third sector to explore how the survey could help address key evidence gaps on child vulnerability and victimisation more generally. Further to this, we are also conducting a feasibility study, to determine whether a national survey could provide an effective source of data on the current scale and nature of child abuse, including exploitation. Findings from the first phase of research were published in January 2021. A [public consultation](#) to gather views on the findings was also launched and we published our response to the feedback received in July 2021. We will publish a progress update in April 2022, which will summarise the key findings from further research, our conclusion to phase one, and outline our next steps. For more information on the feasibility study, please see our article [Exploring the feasibility of a survey measuring child abuse in the UK: January 2021](#).

## 6 . Related links

[Child victims of modern slavery in the UK: March 2022](#)

Statistical Bulletin | Released 29 March 2022

Explores data sources on child victims of modern slavery from a range of organisations.