

Statistical bulletin

Child victims of modern slavery in the UK: March 2022

The hidden nature of modern slavery makes measuring victim numbers difficult. We have brought together data sources on child victims in the UK from a range of organisations to explore the issue.

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1 . Main points

Warning: This release contains themes that some may find distressing

Modern slavery is an umbrella term for all forms of slavery, human trafficking and exploitation. It is a hidden crime with victims often unable to come forward due to fear or shame, or because they are unable to leave their situation. Consequently, reporting is partial and quantifying the number of victims is challenging.

It's on your doorstep. You just don't see it.

- male victim of criminal exploitation, aged 16 years

There is no one data source that accurately quantifies the number of child victims in the UK. The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) currently provides the best measure of potential victims, although is known to be an undercount. Data for the UK NRM for the year ending December 2021 shows:

- an increase of 9% in the number of potential child victims referred compared with the previous year (from 5,028 to 5,468)
- of those referred, more than 9 in 10 (91%) received a positive reasonable grounds decision (RGD), meaning they were assessed as reasonably likely to be victims
- almost four-fifths (79%) of positive RGDs were for boys; this proportion has increased rapidly since the year ending March 2015
- boys who received a positive RGD were most likely to have been criminally exploited (62%) while girls were most likely to have been sexually exploited (42%)
- over four-fifths (82%) of children who received a positive RGD were aged 15 to 17 years

Changes in police recording practices and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic have likely affected the number of child victims identified in recent years. Alongside data from the NRM, other data sources show:

- an increase of 27% (to 3,239) in the number of modern slavery offences involving a child victim recorded by the police in England and Wales in the year ending March 2021 compared with the previous year
- 16,830 episodes of need for child sexual exploitation and 2,710 for trafficking identified by the Department for Education's children in need census in the year ending March 2021, both representing a 10% decrease from the previous year; likely the result of a fall in referrals from schools during the pandemic
- a 43% decrease in the number of potential child victims reported to the Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline in the year ending December 2021 compared with the previous year

Between April 2016 and March 2021, the Crown Prosecution Service completed 185 modern slavery-related prosecutions involving a child victim in England and Wales – with a 51% conviction rate.

The statistics in this release are used by the UK for the reporting and monitoring of indicators 8.7.1 and 16.2.2 of the [UN's Sustainable Development Goals](#). Information on how we sourced the most suitable data source for these indicators see can be found in [Sourcing data on child victims of modern slavery, UK: progress report](#).

Finding help

If you or someone you know is being or has been exploited or you are unsure if someone is in need of help, assistance and advice is available.

- For life-threatening emergencies, call 999, or for non-emergencies, call 101 for the police.
- The [Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline](#) can be called on +44 8000 121700 or contacted via an [online form](#).
- The [National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\)](#) can be called on +44 8088 005000 or emailed at help@nspcc.org.uk.
- [Victim Support](#) can be called on +44 8081 689111 or contacted via an [online form](#).
- [Crimestoppers](#) can be called on +44 8005 55111 or contacted via an [online form](#).

2 . National Referral Mechanism

The [National Referral Mechanism \(NRM\)](#) was introduced in 2009 as a framework for identifying, referring and supporting victims of modern slavery and human trafficking in the UK.

Following a referral into the NRM by staff at designated first responder organisations, a reasonable grounds decision (RGD) is made about “potential victims” to assess whether they are thought to be victims of modern slavery.

Since April 2009, 24,675 potential child victims of modern slavery (under the age of 18 years at the time of exploitation) have been referred to the NRM ([Dataset Table 1](#)).

In the year ending December 2021, the number of referrals of children to the NRM increased by 9% compared with the previous year (from 5,028 to 5,468), continuing an upward trend over time (Figure 1). The majority of these referrals (60%) were of UK nationals ([Dataset Table 4](#)).

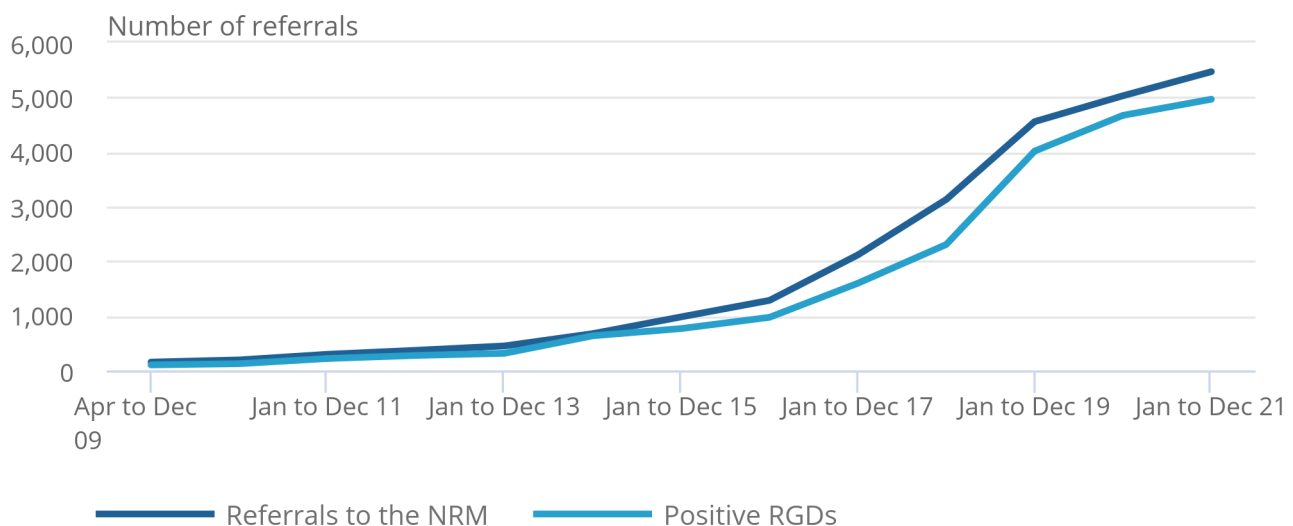
Trends in the data may not reflect underlying changes in prevalence and may be related to changes in awareness and identification of potential child victims.

Figure 1: National Referral Mechanism (NRM) referrals and positive reasonable grounds decisions continue to increase over time

***Number of referrals to the NRM and positive referral grounds decisions (RGDs) of children, UK, year ending December 2009 to year ending December 2021**

Figure 1: National Referral Mechanism (NRM) referrals and positive reasonable grounds decisions continue to increase over time

Number of referrals to the NRM and positive referral grounds decisions (RGDs) of children, UK, year ending December 2009 to year ending December 2021



Source: Home Office – National Referral Mechanism

Of children who received a positive RGD (assessed as reasonably likely to be a victim of modern slavery) in the year ending December 2021:

- almost four in five (79%) were boys and one in five (21%) were girls ([Dataset Table 7](#))
- more than four in five (82%) were aged 15 to 17 years ([Dataset Table 8](#))
- boys were most likely to have experienced criminal exploitation (62%) and girls' sexual exploitation (42%; Figure 2)

Find out more about definitions of criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation in [A typology of modern slavery offences in the UK gov.uk research](#).

They had loads of money and nice cars. They gave me stuff, gave me money - a lot of money for a 13-year-old kid. They made me feel like I belonged.

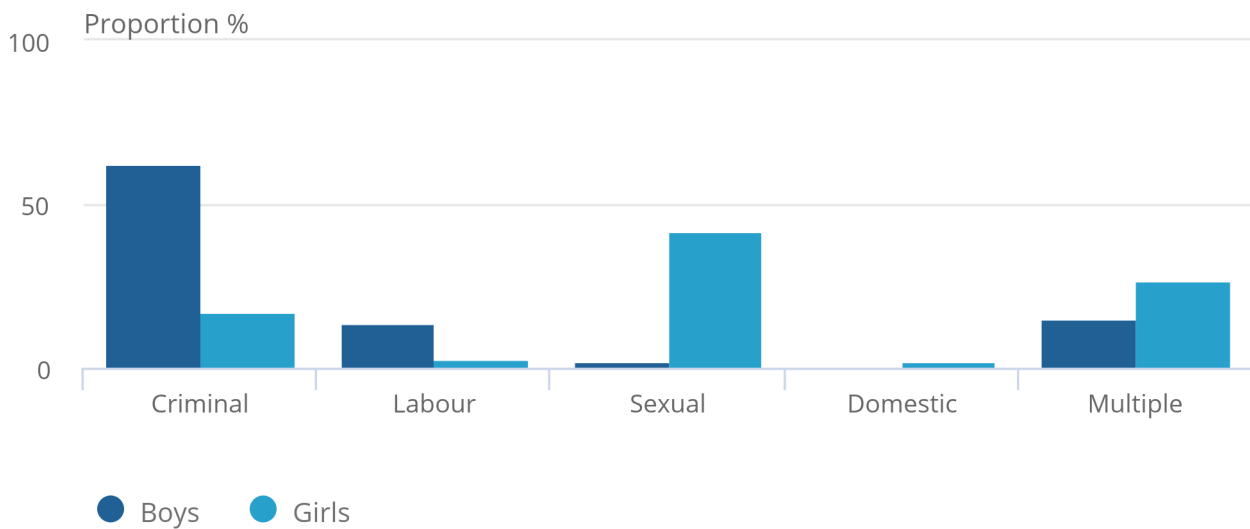
- male victim of criminal exploitation aged 16 years

Figure 2: Exploitation-type varied by sex

Percentage of children who received a positive reasonable grounds decision (RGD), by sex and type of exploitation, UK, year ending December 2021

Figure 2: Exploitation-type varied by sex

Percentage of children who received a positive reasonable grounds decision (RGD), by sex and type of exploitation, UK, year ending December 2021



Source: Home Office – National Referral Mechanism

Notes:

1. Percentages do not sum to 100%, as cases where the exploitation type was “unknown or not specified” or “organ harvesting” have not been included within the chart. See [Dataset Table 9](#) for this information.

3 . Police recorded crime

Police recorded crime (PRC) data demonstrates how modern slavery offences are being reported and recorded by the police following the introduction of modern slavery acts across the UK in 2015. Data on modern slavery cases that come to the attention of the police only provide a partial picture as many cases remain unreported. Changes in police recording practices and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic have likely affected the number of child victims identified in recent years.

I will get my head kicked in if I am seen talking to anyone.

- female victim of sexual exploitation aged 14 years

Data from England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland cannot be combined to calculate the total number of offences in the UK, because they use different recording processes and offence codes.

England and Wales

In the year ending March 2021, police recorded modern slavery offences involving a child increased by 27% to 3,239, continuing the upwards trend seen in recent years ([Dataset Table 12](#)). The majority of offences were for “forced or compulsory labour” (64%; [Dataset Table 12](#)).

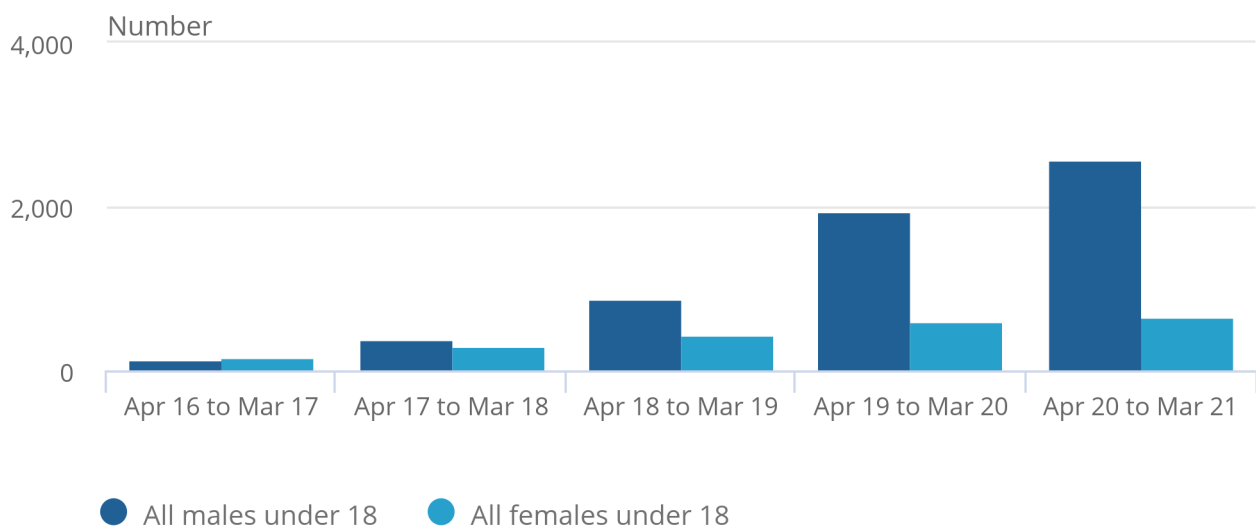
The proportion of offences involving boys has increased over time (Figure 3), accounting for four-fifths of recorded offences in the year ending March 2021. This may be because of the steep increase seen in “forced or compulsory labour” offences, where boys are typically victimised.

Figure 3: Number of boys victimised increased more rapidly than girls

Number of police recorded modern slavery offences where victim was aged under 18 years, by sex, England and Wales, year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2021

Figure 3: Number of boys victimised increased more rapidly than girls

Number of police recorded modern slavery offences where victim was aged under 18 years, by sex, England and Wales, year ending March 2017 to year ending March 2021



Source: Home Office Data Hub – Police recorded crime

Notes:

1. Figures are based on 40 police forces that supplied data, where both sex and age of victim were recorded. Kent, Greater Manchester, Staffordshire and Wiltshire police forces were unable to supply data.

Scotland

In the year ending March 2021, Police Scotland recorded 85 modern slavery offences where the victim was aged under 18 years; a 44% decrease from the previous year ([Dataset Table 15](#)). In the five years between April 2016 and March 2021, around two-thirds (68%) of modern slavery offences involving children had a male victim.

Northern Ireland

Between April 2016 and March 2021, the Police Service of Northern Ireland recorded 25 modern slavery offences where the victim was aged under 18 years at the time of the offence. The majority of victims (72%) were girls ([Dataset Table 16](#)).

4 . Prosecutions and convictions

Modern slavery cases are among the most challenging and complex to investigate and prosecute. The hidden nature of this crime reduces the available evidence to make a charging decision. This is compounded by the level of control and coercion from perpetrators.

I was scared he would come after me if I tried to leave.

- female victim of sexual and criminal exploitation aged 14 years

In England and Wales, between April 2016 and March 2021, 185 prosecutions were completed for cases flagged as modern slavery in which the victim was a child. Of these cases, 95 resulted in a conviction and 90 in non-convictions ([Dataset Table 17](#)). Non-convictions were mainly because of prosecutions being dropped.

In the five years ending December 2021, Scotland completed eight prosecutions for modern slavery offences involving a child, and Northern Ireland completed one. However, none resulted in a conviction.

5 . Children in need census

The children in need census (CIN) is an annual statutory census that collects data on children who are referred to local authority social care services in England. A child begins an “episode of need” when they are referred to children’s social care services. Local authorities then undertake an assessment of the child’s needs to determine which services to provide.

In the year ending March 2021, a total of 496,030 episodes of need had a factor identified at the end of an assessment ([Dataset Table 20](#)). Of these, 16,830 identified the child sexual exploitation (CSE) factor, 2,710 identified the trafficking factor, and 1,950 identified the abuse linked to faith or belief factor (which includes domestic slavery and sexual exploitation). The number of episodes for CSE and trafficking each reflect a 10% decrease compared with the previous year.

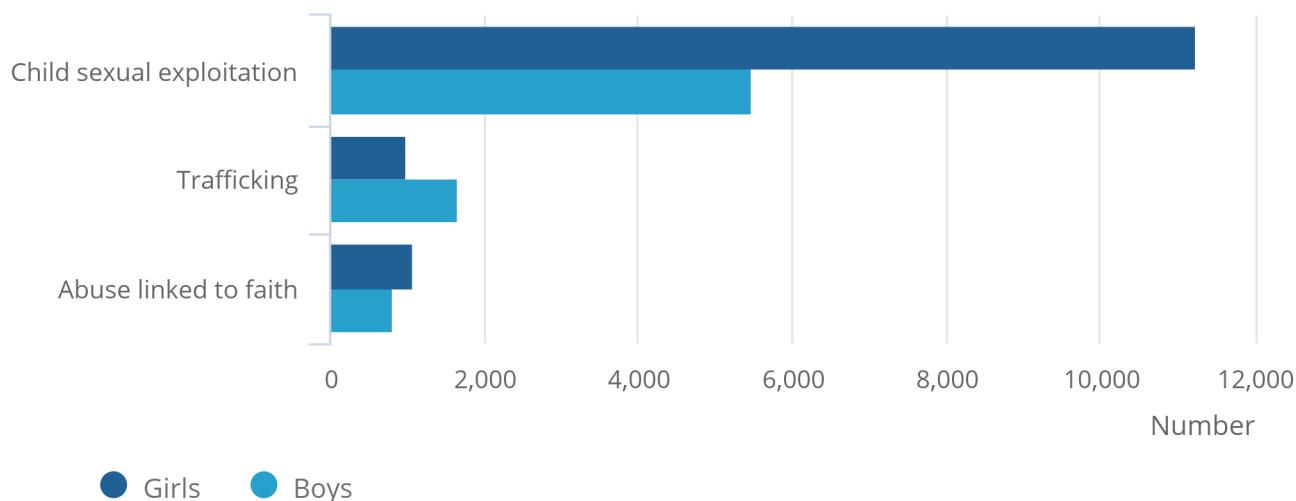
The CSE factor was identified in more episodes of need for girls (11,230) than boys (5,490) – a pattern consistent over time ([Dataset Table 20](#)). This is illustrated in Figure 4. CSE accounted for 5% of all factors for girls, compared with 2% for boys.

Figure 4: More girls had the child sexual exploitation factor flagged

Number of episodes of need with factors identified at the end of assessment, by factor and sex, England, year ending March 2021

Figure 4: More girls had the child sexual exploitation factor flagged

Number of episodes of need with factors identified at the end of assessment, by factor and sex, England, year ending March 2021



Source: Department for Education – Children in need census

Notes:

1. A child may have more than one episode of need during a year and therefore may be counted more than once in these figures.
2. An individual factor is counted only once against each episode of need.

Men took me, they did whatever they wanted to me. I just cried every night. If my parents ever found out, they'd kill me.

- female aged 16 years who was sexually exploited

In the year ending March 2021, children aged 10 to 15 years had the highest number of episodes of need with the CSE factor and abuse linked to faith factors (8,090 and 660 respectively). Children aged 16 years and over had the highest number of episodes of need with a trafficking factor identified (1,320; [Dataset Table 21](#)).

6 . Service providers

Data from charities help to indicate the number of victims seeking or accepting support, and subsequently the workload of the organisations, which may have been affected by the coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic. While such data provide insight into those victims receiving support, many are dependent on receiving cases from the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). They are therefore unlikely to highlight new victims of modern slavery.

We can only tackle it if we have successfully identified it in the first place, and this is why the data is so vital.

- Sarah Parker, Catch22 Missing and Child Exploitation Services

The Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline

The UK's [Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline](#) is independently operated by the [anti-slavery charity, Unseen](#). Unseen gathers information from the calls and reports they receive through the helpline to build a picture of modern slavery in the UK and internationally.

In the year ending December 2021, the Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline indicated that there were 194 potential child victims (aged 17 years or under) of modern slavery from calls, webforms and app entries. This is a 43% decrease from the previous year (340; [Dataset Table 22](#)). Prior to this, the number of potential child victims indicated through the helpline year-on-year had remained stable.

Of the 194 potential child victims of modern slavery indicated in the latest year, 61 were girls, 57 were boys, and the sex was unknown for the remaining 76. This reflects the difficulty of collecting complete or accurate information from witness reports, particularly for such a hidden crime.

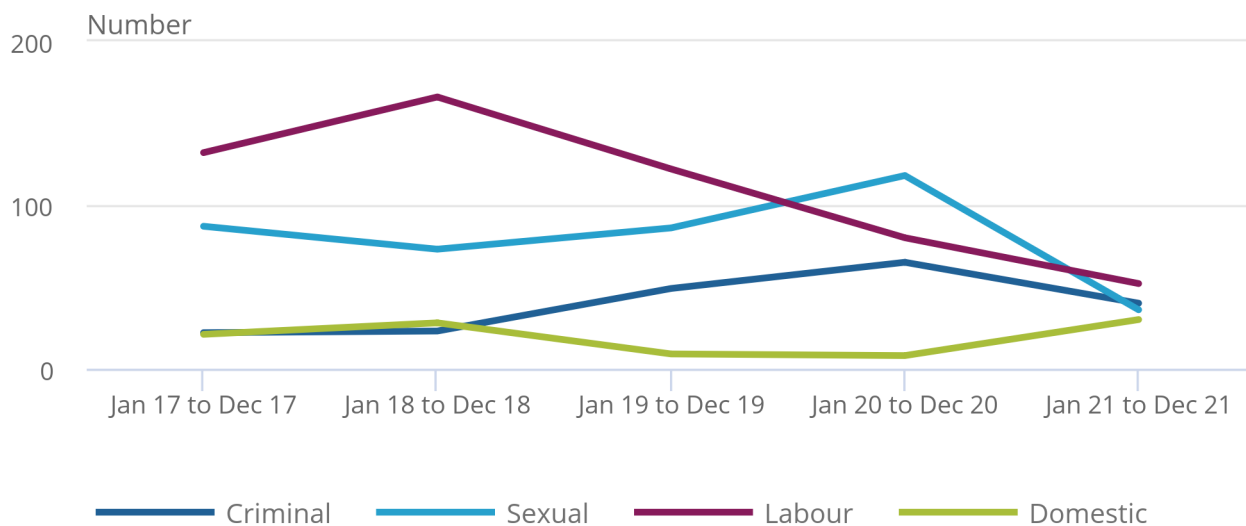
Between January 2017 and December 2021, 37% of potential child victims of modern slavery indicated through the helpline had experienced labour exploitation and 27% had experienced sexual exploitation ([Dataset Table 23](#)). While the number for labour exploitation has gradually decreased over the previous five years, the number for sexual exploitation had been increasing from the year ending December 2018 until the year ending December 2021, when it dropped by 69% (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Child labour exploitation indicated by the helpline decreased over time

Number of potential child victims indicated from submissions to the Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline, by exploitation type, UK, year ending December 2017 to December 2021

Figure 5: Child labour exploitation indicated by the helpline decreased over time

Number of potential child victims indicated from submissions to the Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline, by exploitation type, UK, year ending December 2017 to December 2021



Source: Unseen – Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline

Independent Child Trafficking Guardians

The Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs) service is run by [Barnardos](#) and sponsored by the Home Office. It supports trafficked children to navigate criminal justice, immigration, and social care systems.

In the year ending December 2020, there were 27% more referrals than the previous year (555 compared with 437; [Dataset Table 24](#)). Data on demographics and exploitation type are presented for October 2018 to December 2019. Within this time frame, 379 boys and 134 girls were referred to ICTGs ([Dataset Table 25](#)), with a higher number of boys criminally exploited than girls (216 compared with 17; [Dataset Table 26](#)).

Catch22

[Catch22](#) is a non-profit organisation that supports young people at risk of trafficking and exploitation through its Missing and Child Exploitation Services. This involves sharing intelligence with police, children's services, and Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships.

Of providers within the service who were able to provide data in the year ending March 2021, Catch22 flagged 157 children at high risk of trafficking and exploitation across England ([Dataset Table 28](#)).

Scottish Guardianship Service

The Scottish Guardianship Service, run by [Aberlour](#), supports unaccompanied asylum-seeking and trafficked children who arrive in Scotland alone (without parents), through immigration and welfare processes. If a trafficked child is referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), the Scottish Guardianship Service may provide supporting information as part of this process.

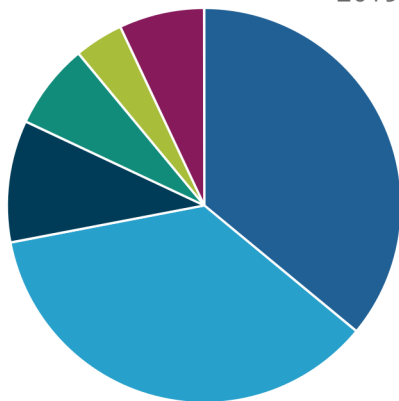
Between January 2019 and February 2022, the Scottish Guardianship Service submitted 147 trafficking-flagged cases of children to the NRM. Labour exploitation and cannabis cultivation (a type of criminal exploitation) accounted for 36% of referrals each (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Most referrals were for child labour exploitation or cannabis cultivation

Proportion of Scottish Guardianship Service cases that identified a trafficking indicator and were referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), by type of exploitation, Scotland, January 2019 to February 2022

Figure 6: Most referrals were for child labour exploitation or cannabis cultivation

Proportion of Scottish Guardianship Service cases that identified a trafficking indicator and were referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), by type of exploitation, Scotland, January 2019 to February 2022



Source: Aberlour – Scottish Guardianship Service

Notes:

1. "Intent to exploit" are cases where a child has been trafficked with intent to exploit, however the child has either escaped or has been rescued before the exploitation could occur.

7 . Child victims of modern slavery data

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

Dataset | Released 29 March 2022

A range of available data from various organisations relating to child victims of modern slavery.

8 . Glossary

Conviction

Cases where the defendant was convicted following a prosecution, including:

- conviction after trial: cases in which the defendant pleaded not guilty, but was convicted after the evidence was heard
- guilty plea: where the defendant pleaded guilty
- proof in absence: cases comprising of lesser offences, which were heard by the court in the absence of the defendant

Modern slavery

An umbrella term that is used in England and Wales to refer to crimes of human trafficking, slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour. It is considered to be the equivalent of the legal definitions of Human Trafficking and Exploitation in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Potential victim

The term “potential victim” is given to an individual, following referral into the National Referral Mechanism, and prior to a reasonable grounds decision being made.

Prosecution

All cases where the defendant(s) were charged, summonsed in court, or charged by way of a postal requisition during the period. This includes those proceeding to a trial or guilty plea, those discontinued, and those which could not proceed.

Reasonable grounds decision

A reasonable grounds decision in the National Referral Mechanism process assesses whether there are “reasonable grounds” to believe that the person is a victim of modern slavery.

9 . Measuring the data

This release brings together data on child victims of modern slavery from a range of different organisations. Although the data sources do not provide a measure of prevalence, bringing them together provides a better understanding of the nature of this crime in the UK.

National Referral Mechanism

As modern slavery is often a hidden crime, many cases will go unreported and therefore National Referral Mechanism (NRM) data will always be an undercount of the true number of victims. However, the NRM provides a good measure of the level of awareness of modern slavery from first responder organisations (via data on referrals), as well as the number of potential victims who receive a positive reasonable grounds decision.

Police recorded crime

[Police recorded crime data from England and Wales](#) are supplied by the Home Office. They are responsible for the collation of recorded crime data supplied by the 43 territorial police forces of England and Wales, plus the British Transport Police. When recording child modern slavery offences, it is not always possible to record the age and sex of the victim. Figures are based on 40 police forces that supplied data, where both sex and age of victim were recorded. Kent, Greater Manchester, Staffordshire and Wiltshire police forces were unable to supply data.

Data from Scotland are supplied by the Scottish Government and are sourced from the [Recorded Crime in Scotland](#). The data presented in this release were obtained from referrals that Police Scotland received during the time-period through the NRM.

[Police recorded crime data for Northern Ireland \(PDF, 1,006.5KB\)](#) are supplied by the Police Service Northern Ireland and are an aggregation of offences across the districts in Northern Ireland.

Crown Prosecution Service

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) is the principal prosecuting authority in England and Wales, acting independently in criminal cases investigated by the police and others.

For each proceeding and prosecution case, there could be multiple charges, defendants and victims. The CPS “flag” all cases involving human trafficking and modern slavery within their database. The data are accurate only to the extent that the flag has been correctly applied. For this release, to identify cases where the victim was a child, the CPS cross-referenced cases that were flagged for modern slavery and child abuse.

Because of the time-lag between each stage of the criminal justice system, data recorded by the CPS will not necessarily be the same cases as recorded by the police or NRM in the same time frame.

Children in need census

[The children in need census \(CIN\) \(PDF, 231KB\)](#) collects data from children aged up to 18 years. It also collects data from unborn children and young people aged 18 years and over, who continue to receive support from children’s social care services.

Following referral, the child is assessed by a social worker to inform decisions about provision of support services. The social worker identifies factors (including child sexual exploitation and trafficking) that affect the child’s health and development or put the child at risk of harm.

Local authorities can differ in their recording practices. Therefore, data on factors identified at the end of assessment should not be taken to represent the national prevalence of issues such as trafficking, child sexual exploitation and abuse linked to faith or belief.

The Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline

When information provided by the contact or caller indicates a potential victim of modern slavery, the [Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline](#) uses the term “potential victim”. This term is used because Unseen do not verify the accuracy of the information provided.

Independent Child Trafficking Guardians

The Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs) service highlights specific needs and care requirements of children who are referred. The service then provides children with advice on welfare matters, and facilitates access to education, healthcare, and mental health services.

The data presented in this bulletin are taken from [An assessment of Independent Child Trafficking Guardians report](#), which is an ad-hoc report, assessing the ICTGs service, covering October 2018 to December 2019. The data are also taken from the [2021 UK Annual Report on Modern Slavery \(PDF, 810.5KB\)](#), which includes high level data for the year ending December 2020.

Catch22

The Catch22 data presented in this release are collated from four of Catch22's service providers; one covering London, one the North West, and the other two cover the Midlands. All quotes in this bulletin are sourced by them.

Scottish Guardianship Service

Local Authorities, social workers, police and the Home Office refer eligible young persons to the Scottish Guardianship Service, who then provide support and help gather further information in order to submit a referral to the NRM.

10 . Strengths and limitations

The data sources in this release are sourced from different organisations and are not directly comparable. They are collected on different bases (for example, victims, crimes or suspects), with different recording practices, and cover different time periods. Additionally, some data sources do not cover all countries of the UK, therefore data are presented separately and cannot be combined. However, bringing together these data sources helps to provide a better understanding of the extent and nature of this crime in the UK.

Police recorded crime data in Scotland and Northern Ireland and Children in need census data are classified as [National Statistics](#).

Police recorded crime data in England and Wales and data from the National Referral Mechanism are not classified as National Statistics.

Data from the Crown Prosecution Service, Modern Slavery and Exploitation Helpline, Independent Child Trafficking Guardians, Catch22 and Scottish Guardianship Service are not classified as [official statistics](#).

11 . Related links

[Sourcing data on child victims of modern slavery, UK: progress report](#)

Article | 29 March 2022

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

[Modern slavery in the UK: March 2020](#)

Article | 26 March 2020

The hidden nature of modern slavery makes producing an accurate prevalence measure difficult. This article explores the issue and brings together data sources linked to modern slavery from a range of organisations.