

Kulturalism®

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

What You Need to Know.
A UK Public Awareness Guide.

Who This Handbook Is For

This handbook is written for anyone who might be the first person to notice.

Most trafficking is not uncovered by intelligence operations. It is uncovered because an ordinary person saw something that did not sit right and told somebody about it. The largest modern slavery case in British history, described later in this book, began at a soup kitchen.

You do not need expertise to be useful. You need to know roughly what you are looking at, and you need to know who to tell. That is what this handbook is for.

It is not legal advice. Where it describes the law, it does so in plain English and in general terms, and anyone facing criminal proceedings or an immigration decision needs a solicitor, not a handbook.

A note on what is difficult. This book deals with the sexual exploitation of adults and children, with forced labour, and with violence. It does so plainly, because vagueness helps nobody, but it does not dwell on detail for its own sake.

If You Need Help Now

If someone is in immediate danger, call 999.

Modern Slavery Helpline — 08000 121 700

Open twenty-four hours a day, every day. Free and confidential. You do not have to give your name. The line takes calls from members of the public, from professionals, and from people who are being exploited themselves.

Police, non-emergency — 101

Crimestoppers — 0800 555 111

Anonymous. They will not ask who you are.

NSPCC — 0808 800 5000

For any concern involving a child.

Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority

For concerns about wages, working conditions or a labour provider.

You do not need to be certain that something is wrong before you make any of these calls.

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Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery

Modern slavery is not a historical term borrowed for effect. It is the name given in UK law to a group of offences under the [Modern Slavery Act 2015](#), and there are people living in those conditions in every part of this country.

Human trafficking is one part of it. It means recruiting, moving, harbouring or receiving a person for the purpose of exploiting them. Slavery, servitude and forced labour are the conditions the person ends up in. The two overlap constantly, which is why people use the terms almost interchangeably, but the law treats them as distinct offences.

What makes it difficult to see is that it rarely looks like captivity. There are no chains and usually no locked doors. Control is achieved through debt, through threats to family members thousands of miles away, through the removal of documents, through addiction, through shame, and through the simple fact that a person who does not speak the language and does not know which town they are in has nowhere to go.

Victims frequently do not describe themselves as victims. Some do not know the word applies to them. Some are protecting the person exploiting them, because that person is also the only person who has shown them affection. Some have been told, accurately or otherwise, that going to the police will get them deported or get their mother hurt. Many have already been to the authorities once and been treated as an offender.

This last point matters more than any other in this book. The line between victim and criminal in trafficking cases is not a line at all. It is a question of who noticed what, and when.

Trafficking or Smuggling?

They Are Not the Same Thing

Most people use these two words as though they mean roughly the same thing. They don't, and the difference is not academic. It decides whether the person standing in front of a police officer is treated as a victim or as an offender.

Smuggling is a crime against a border. Someone pays to be brought into a country illegally, they agree to it, and once they arrive the arrangement is generally finished. The offence has been committed against the state. Trafficking is a crime against a person. Someone is recruited, moved or held so that they can be exploited, and the exploitation is the entire point of the exercise. The wrong is done to a human being, not to a passport control desk.

Three misunderstandings cause most of the damage. The first is the belief that trafficking requires a border. It does not. A boy moved from Manchester to a seaside town to sell heroin has been trafficked, and no passport was ever involved. The Home Office's own figures make this plain: British citizens were the single largest group of potential victims referred in 2025, and thirty-nine per cent of all victims said they had been exploited entirely within the UK.

The second is the belief that consent settles the matter. It doesn't. Where force, threats, deception or the abuse of someone's vulnerability have been used, whatever the person agreed to counts for nothing in law. And for anyone under eighteen, consent is irrelevant. A child cannot agree to their own exploitation, however willing they appear, however much they insist they chose it, and however loyal they are to the person exploiting them.

The third is the assumption that a person is either smuggled or trafficked, never both. In practice one becomes the other with grim regularity. Someone pays to be brought here, then arrives owing a debt at a price that was never agreed in advance. That is deliberate: the smugglers settle on a figure only once the destination is reached, and by then the person has no way to refuse it. They are put to work to pay off a sum designed never to reduce. The journey was smuggling. Everything that follows is trafficking.

This is why the word used first matters so much. Treated as an immigration offender, a person is questioned about how they entered the country. Recognised as a potential

victim, that same person is entitled to protection, support and a recovery period. Same facts, same human being, two entirely different lives from that point on.

The Forms Exploitation Takes

There is no single crime called trafficking. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 covers a range of exploitation, and knowing which form you might be looking at is what allows you to report it in a way that gets acted upon.

Sexual exploitation covers forced prostitution, exploitation through pornography, and the sexual exploitation of children. Victims are moved constantly between flats, hotels and short-term lets, advertised online, and controlled by someone who takes every penny. Globally it is the most profitable form by a wide margin. [The International Labour Organization](#) attributes seventy-three per cent of all illegal forced labour profits to forced commercial sexual exploitation, despite it accounting for only twenty-seven per cent of victims.

Labour exploitation is forced or compulsory work in car washes, agriculture, food processing, construction, hospitality, care homes and nail bars. The pattern is long hours, little or no pay, wages paid into somebody else's bank account, and accommodation, transport and food deducted from earnings until there is nothing left to send home and no money with which to leave.

Domestic servitude happens entirely behind a front door, which is what makes it the hardest form to see. A person is kept in a private household as a cleaner, cook or carer, sleeping on a floor or in a shared room, without days off, without pay, and often without their passport, which the family holds.

Criminal exploitation means forcing someone to commit crimes for another person's profit. County lines drug supply, cannabis cultivation, shoplifting to order, pickpocketing, cash machine fraud, and benefit claims made in the victim's name. Children are the primary target. In 2025, half of all children referred — 3,485 of them — were referred for [criminal exploitation](#), making it the most common form of exploitation reported for under-eighteens.

Forced marriage arises where one or both people do not consent, or cannot consent, and pressure or abuse is used to secure the marriage. It is a criminal offence in its own right, and where a person has been moved for that purpose it is also trafficking. The UK courts can issue Forced Marriage [Protection Orders](#) to protect anyone being forced into a marriage, or already in one.

Organ harvesting is rare in this country but recognised in law, covering a person moved so that their organs can be removed.

None of these stay in tidy boxes. The woman brought in to clean a house may also be sexually exploited by the household. The boy running a line may be forced into violence and buried under a debt at the same time. Expect overlap, because most real cases involve it.

The Global Picture

It helps to know where Britain sits in all this, because the numbers surprise people in both directions.

The ten countries with the largest estimated numbers of people in modern slavery are India with eleven million, China with 5.8 million, North Korea with 2.7 million, Pakistan with 2.3 million, Russia with 1.9 million, Indonesia with 1.8 million, Nigeria with 1.6 million, Türkiye with 1.3 million, Bangladesh with 1.2 million and the United States with 1.1 million. Together they account for nearly two in every three people living in modern slavery worldwide.

But sheer numbers follow population, and prevalence tells a different story. Measured as a proportion of population, North Korea is the worst place in the world, with an estimated 104 people in modern slavery for every thousand inhabitants, roughly one person in ten. Eritrea follows at ninety per thousand, then Mauritania at thirty-two and Saudi Arabia at twenty-one. In North Korea and Eritrea much of it is imposed by the state itself.

The money explains why it persists. Forced labour generates an estimated 236 billion US dollars a year in illegal profits, a rise of thirty-seven per cent since 2014, with traffickers making close to ten thousand dollars from each victim.

Europe and Central Asia produce the highest regional total at eighty-four billion dollars, more than Asia and the Pacific, and more than the Americas. This is not a distant problem that happens somewhere hot and far away. The most profitable market on earth for forced labour is the one Britain sits inside.

Warning Signs

No single sign proves anything. What matters is the pattern, and the feeling that the explanation you have been given does not quite cover what you are seeing.

Someone being controlled is rarely alone. There is often another person who speaks for them, holds their documents, answers questions directed at them, and stays close in a way that reads as protective until you notice it never stops. They may not know their own address, may be unsure which town they are in, and may give an account of their situation that sounds learned rather than lived.

Look at their circumstances. Living where they work, or in accommodation that seems far too crowded for its size. No bank account of their own, or wages paid to someone else. No mobile phone, or a phone somebody else controls. Wearing the same clothes day after day, or clothing unsuited to the work they are doing. No identification documents, or documents held by an employer or landlord.

Look at their physical state. Untreated injuries. Exhaustion. Signs of malnutrition or dehydration. Injuries consistent with an accident at work that was never reported anywhere. Someone who flinches, avoids eye contact, or seems to be watching for permission before answering.

With children and young people, the signs are different. Going missing repeatedly, particularly returning after several days without explanation. Being found a long way from home. New clothes, trainers or a phone that nobody can account for. More than one phone. Unexplained money. Older friends nobody has met. A sudden change in behaviour, language or attitude. Injuries they refuse to explain. Travelling alone on trains and coaches at odd hours.

In workplaces, watch for a single person controlling several workers, transporting them together, and speaking for all of them. Watch for deductions from pay that swallow the wage. Watch for workers who cannot say who employs them.

At residential addresses, the signals are mundane: curtains permanently closed, a great many people coming and going at unusual hours, visitors who never stay long, a vehicle that returns repeatedly, rubbish or activity that does not match the number of people

supposedly living there. None of this amounts to proof, and it is not your job to obtain any. It amounts to a reason to tell somebody.

County Lines: A Business Model That Runs on Children

In Norwich, a single drugs line was described by police as established, highly profitable, and serving a customer base of around three hundred people. The person controlling that phone was not in Norwich. He was in London, and he had probably never set foot in Norfolk.

That is county lines in one sentence. The line is not a person or a gang. It is a phone number, a brand with a customer base, and it is the asset that matters. Whoever holds the line takes the profit and takes almost none of the risk, because the risk has been handed to somebody else: a fourteen-year-old on a train with a bag he has been told not to open, sent a hundred and fifty miles from anyone who knows his name.

The recruitment rarely looks like recruitment. It looks like a lift home when it's raining. It looks like someone older taking an interest, a new pair of trainers, a phone, being told he's got potential. By the time there's a debt, and there is always a debt, usually manufactured by a robbery that was staged or a package that was never really lost, the boy has already stopped telling anyone where he is going. He isn't being held anywhere. He goes back voluntarily, which is precisely what makes people struggle to see him as a victim.

Two features make this trade different from anything before it. The first is geography, used deliberately as a weapon. A child moved from his own city to a town where he knows nobody has no friend to run to, no relative's house to reach, and no idea which direction the station is in. The second is cuckooing: the taking over of a vulnerable adult's home as a base. Someone with a learning disability, a drug dependency or a mental health condition finds their flat has become a shop. They are usually the last person the neighbours feel sympathy for and the first person the police find inside.

In 2025, 2,083 referrals were flagged as county lines cases, and three-quarters of those were boys under eighteen. Three-quarters of all UK nationals referred that year were children. These are British children, in British towns, and they are the largest single group of child victims this country produces.

The Damage Done

Trafficking does not simply take a period of someone's life away. It alters what is left of it.

The physical toll comes first because it is the most visible. Victims are routinely denied adequate food and water, because hunger is a cheap and effective control. Prolonged malnutrition weakens the immune system, stunts growth in children, and leaves chronic health problems that outlast the exploitation by decades. Violence, unsafe working conditions and untreated injuries produce broken bones that healed wrong, burns, scarring and permanent disability. Medical care is withheld, so infections become chronic and manageable conditions become serious ones.

Those exploited sexually carry a particular burden: sexually transmitted infections, forced abortions, pregnancy complications, and in some cases sterilisation carried out without consent. Many are made dependent on drugs or alcohol, sometimes to keep them compliant, sometimes to numb them enough to continue. That dependency does not end when the exploitation does. And the sheer hours — sixteen to twenty a day is not unusual — produce a level of exhaustion that damages cognition and eventually causes physical collapse.

The psychological damage is deeper and lasts longer. Traffickers work deliberately on a person's sense of their own worth, using shame, humiliation and repetition until the victim accepts that they deserve what is happening. Threats to family are the most powerful tool of all, and the most durable: a person who believes their mother will be hurt if they speak will not speak, and will often keep not speaking long after they are safe.

The social consequences are the ones people least expect. Traffickers isolate victims from friends, family and community as a matter of method, so that by the time someone escapes there may be nobody left to escape to. Survivors, particularly those exploited sexually, then meet judgment rather than sympathy — from their own communities, sometimes from their own families, and sometimes from the services meant to help them. That stigma pushes people back towards the only environment where they were not judged, which is often the one they came from.

Years of abuse and manipulation make it enormously difficult to trust anyone, to set boundaries, or to recognise what a healthy relationship looks like. Children lose the schooling years that cannot be recovered. Adults lose work history, skills and confidence, and many face long-term poverty and unemployment as a direct result.

The Ripple Effect on Families

The harm does not stop with the person who was exploited.

Children of victims live inside the consequences. They may witness domestic violence and instability where the trafficking was tied to an abusive relationship. They may be neglected, not through indifference but because a parent too traumatised to function cannot care for them. They may be separated from that parent by the state. In the worst cases they are exploited alongside their parents. Even where none of that happens, they lose the attention of an overwhelmed adult, and many develop anxiety, depression or behavioural difficulties of their own. Some are targeted for grooming by the very networks that took their parents.

For victims trafficked from abroad, families in the country of origin suffer a particular and cruel form of harm, because they usually do not know what has happened.

Traffickers manufacture false hope and maintain it deliberately. Families believe their son or daughter is working abroad and sending money home. In reality the trafficker forces the victim to send small amounts, just enough to sustain the illusion, while keeping the rest. Relatives spend years grateful to the person enslaving someone they love.

Then there is debt. Families sell land, borrow at ruinous rates or mortgage their homes to pay traffickers for travel costs or job opportunities that were never real. When the truth finally emerges, they are left in poverty with debts they cannot pay, and often with no idea where the person they paid for has gone.

The Business of Trafficking

Human trafficking is an industry. It has recruitment, logistics, personnel management and profit margins, and it behaves accordingly. Understanding how it operates is what makes it possible to interrupt.

Recruitment is the first stage, and it is where deception does most of the work. Job advertisements offer well-paid work abroad — care work, hospitality, factory jobs — that does not exist. Victims pay for their own travel and arrive to find the job was a hook. Others are recruited through relationships: the so-called boyfriend model, where a groomer poses as a partner, offers affection, gifts and a vision of a better life, then manipulates the victim into exploitation. It is especially common in the sexual exploitation of children.

Trust within a community is exploited just as readily. Someone from the victim's own village, community or extended family offers help with migration or work, and sells them instead. Social media has industrialised the whole process: fake job adverts, modelling opportunities and talent-scout scams on Instagram, TikTok and Facebook reach vulnerable young people at scale. Outright abduction happens, mostly in conflict zones and high-crime areas, and is comparatively rare in the UK.

Once a person is in place, control replaces recruitment. Documents are taken. Debts are created and inflated. Psychological manipulation does the rest, and threats to family remain the single most effective instrument the trafficker has, because they work at a distance and they work indefinitely.

The profits are the reason it endures. Globally, forced labour generates an estimated 236 billion US dollars a year, making it one of the most lucrative forms of organised crime in the world. In the UK, a single victim of sexual exploitation may generate very substantial sums for a trafficker over a year; labour exploitation yields less per person but operates at greater scale, particularly in agriculture, construction and car washes; and an established county line can turn over several thousand pounds a day, with exploited children taking the risk while adults take the money.

That money does not sit still. It funds further criminal activity, buys weapons, pays for corruption and finances expansion into new territory. Traffickers live comfortably while the people generating their income do not.

How They Get Caught

The most striking thing about the biggest modern slavery case in British history is where it started. Not with a raid, or an informant, or an intelligence report. It started at a soup kitchen run by a small church in West Bromwich, where a charity had been quietly training staff and volunteers to notice things.

[Hope for Justice](#), working alongside West Midlands Police, the National Crime Agency and the Crown Prosecution Service, brought down a Polish trafficking network in the operation known as Operation Fort. Ninety-two victims were formally identified, though investigators believe the gang may have exploited as many as four hundred. The victims, aged from seventeen to their sixties, had been promised jobs and accommodation and were instead put to work on farms and in recycling centres across the West Midlands, with most of their wages taken from them. The trial judge described it as the biggest modern slavery network ever identified in this country.

In July 2019, eight members of the gang were sentenced to a combined fifty-five years for slavery, trafficking and money laundering. Three more were convicted at a further trial.

The investigation had begun in February 2015, after two victims escaped and were helped by the charity. Two people, and a volunteer who had been taught what to look for. That is how the largest case in the country's history was built.

Alongside that patient work sits something colder and highly effective. The Metropolitan Police's Operation [Orochi](#), set up in November 2019 to target the people who hold county lines rather than the children carrying for them, has used data tracking to arrest more than 1,100 line holders, with eighty-eight per cent charged and ninety-four per cent convicted.

The method is simple in principle. The line is the evidence. A branded phone number sending bulk marketing messages to hundreds of customers generates an enormous, permanent record of call patterns, cell site data and handset movements, and it points not at the child holding a bag but at the person holding the phone. It works because it inverts the old approach. For years, enforcement caught the visible end of the chain. Orochi goes for the asset. Almost all the line controllers arrested were male, and almost

all were using unregistered pay-as-you-go phones, believing that made them invisible. It did not.

Financial investigation does the rest. Wages paid into an account nobody at that address controls, a landlord with eleven tenancies and no visible income, a car wash taking only cash. Money leaves a trail that a frightened witness does not have to testify to.

The Criminal Justice Response

[The Modern Slavery Act 2015](#) consolidated the offences into a single piece of legislation and gave the courts serious sentencing powers, including life imprisonment for the gravest cases. Getting from an offence to a conviction, however, depends almost entirely on evidence that does not rely on a traumatised person telling their story in a witness box.

Investigators build cases from digital material — phones, computers, messaging apps, financial records and CCTV. They take statements from neighbours, customers and other workers. They gather physical evidence from the sites of exploitation: unsafe conditions, locked rooms, workers' belongings, sleeping arrangements that contradict whatever the employer claims. In the strongest cases, the prosecution could proceed even if the victims never gave evidence at all.

Where victims do give evidence, the courts have measures designed to make that survivable. Testimony can be given over a video link so the witness never has to see the defendant. Screens can shield a witness in the courtroom. Evidence can be pre-recorded through an Achieving Best Evidence interview rather than given live. Anonymity orders can protect a victim's identity from the media. Independent Sexual Violence Advisors and other support workers can accompany a person throughout the process.

Sentencing varies enormously with the severity of the exploitation, the number of victims and the level of violence involved. Lower-level labour exploitation cases attract sentences measured in a small number of years. Sexual exploitation attracts substantially longer terms. Organised networks exploiting multiple victims over sustained periods attract sentences well into double figures, and the most serious cases — extreme violence, large-scale operations, child victims — can result in life imprisonment.

When the Victim Is Treated as the Criminal

This is the part of the system almost nobody knows exists, and it is where the deepest injustice sits.

Trafficking victims are arrested all the time. The fifteen-year-old caught with wraps in his sock. The man found tending plants in the upstairs bedroom of a rented house. The woman using a false document because the real one is in someone else's pocket. All of them have committed an offence. Many of them had no meaningful choice about it.

[Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015](#) exists to deal with exactly this, and it works differently depending on the age of the person relying on it. An adult must show that they were compelled to commit the offence, that the compulsion was a direct result of their slavery or exploitation, and that a reasonable person in the same situation, with the same characteristics, would have seen no realistic alternative.

A child under eighteen does not have to prove compulsion at all. What the child must show is that the act was committed as a direct consequence of being a victim of slavery or exploitation, and that a reasonable person in the same situation with the same characteristics would have done the same thing.

Removing the compulsion test for children matters enormously. A groomed fifteen-year-old does not have to demonstrate that anyone threatened him, which is fortunate, because the most effective grooming rarely involves an explicit threat until it is far too late. But the defence is not automatic, and this is the point most often missed: the link between the exploitation and the offence still has to be there. The child must have done what he did as a direct consequence of what was done to him.

There are limits. [Schedule 4 of the Act](#) excludes a long list of serious offences, including murder, serious violence, sexual offences and terrorism. A trafficking victim who commits one of these cannot rely on section 45 at all.

In practice the defendant has to raise enough evidence to put the defence in play, after which it falls to the prosecution to disprove it to the criminal standard. That sounds like a fair balance, and on paper it is.

The difficulty is that none of it happens unless somebody — a solicitor, a youth worker, a teacher, an arresting officer — recognises the exploitation early enough to name it.

What Happens After Someone Is Found

Recognising a victim is one thing. Getting them into the system that is supposed to protect them is another, and the route is narrower than most people expect.

[The National Referral Mechanism](#) is the framework through which the UK formally identifies victims of modern slavery. Only designated organisations, known as first responders, can make a referral: the police, the Home Office, local authorities, the National Crime Agency, and a specified list of charities. An adult must consent to being referred. A child does not need to consent, and should never be asked to.

Once a referral is made, a decision-maker considers whether there are reasonable grounds to believe the person is a victim. If that decision is positive, protection follows. Under the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the recovery period runs until a conclusive grounds decision is made, or for thirty days from the positive reasonable grounds decision, whichever is later. This replaced the previous forty-five-day reflection and recovery period when the new statutory guidance came into force in January 2023. A second, conclusive grounds decision then determines whether the person is formally recognised as a victim.

Where an adult refuses a referral, the duty to notify applies. Section 52 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 requires public authorities in England and Wales to alert the Home Office when they encounter a potential victim, and adults who decline to enter the system are notified through this route instead. The refusals are not rare, and they are rising. In 2025 more potential victims declined to enter the mechanism than in any previous year, which those working in the sector read as growing mistrust of the system itself.

The demand on it is unprecedented. In 2025, 23,411 potential victims were referred to the [Home Office](#), a twenty-two per cent increase on the previous year and the highest annual figure since the mechanism began in 2009. The most commonly referred nationalities were British, at twenty-two per cent, followed by Eritrean and Vietnamese. Thirty-nine per cent of victims reported being exploited exclusively within the UK.

None of which means the system moves quickly. Waiting times for decisions have run to many weeks, and a person waiting is a person without support, which is exactly the condition in which someone becomes vulnerable to being trafficked a second time.

Life After Trafficking

Being removed from exploitation is not the end of the story. For most survivors it is the beginning of a much longer and less visible struggle.

What helps is well understood. Peer support networks — contact with other survivors — reduce isolation faster than almost anything else, because they place a person among people who do not need the situation explained to them. Resolving immigration status matters enormously, since many survivors live with uncertain status and a persistent fear of removal that keeps them from engaging with any authority. And reconnection with family, where it is safe, can restore something that the exploitation was specifically designed to destroy.

The barriers are equally well understood, and they are largely structural.

The first is the risk of being trafficked again. Desperation for housing, income or human connection makes survivors vulnerable to the same offer that worked the first time, sometimes made by the same network. A significant proportion of victims are exploited more than once.

The second is mental health. Survivors frequently experience severe depression and periods of acute crisis, and the need for specialist trauma support far exceeds what is available. Waiting lists are long, and generic services are often not equipped for what trafficking does to a person.

The third is dependency created during exploitation, which persists afterwards and requires specialist treatment rather than a general referral.

The fourth is money and time. Support tends to end shortly after a conclusive grounds decision, at exactly the point where a person is beginning to rebuild. There is very little long-term funding, and the gap between short-term crisis support and a settled life is where many people fall.

The fifth is a criminal record. Survivors who were arrested for offences they were forced to commit — drug offences, immigration offences, theft — carry those convictions into every housing application and every job interview. The exploitation ends and the punishment for it continues.

None of that means recovery does not happen. It does. Survivors regain independence, make their own decisions, manage their own money and their own homes. They hold down work, return to education, and train. They build relationships in which they are not being used. It takes far longer than the system is designed to allow, and it happens more often where somebody stays involved after the paperwork is finished.

Two Accounts

Neither account describes a real person. Each is drawn from patterns common to many cases.

Daniel, fifteen

Daniel was not snatched off a street. He was noticed.

He had been excluded from school twice and was spending afternoons in a park in a Midlands city, where an older lad started talking to him — nothing about drugs, just football, and a genuine interest in what Daniel thought about things. Over about six weeks there was food, a lift home, a pair of trainers, and a phone. Daniel's mother, working two jobs, was relieved he had a friend.

The first request was small: hold something for a couple of hours. Then deliver something two streets away. Then a longer trip, to a coastal town ninety miles off, with a train ticket bought for him and a return booked for the following day. He did not come home for four days.

The debt appeared after a robbery that Daniel now suspects was arranged. He was jumped, the package was taken, and he was told he owed nine hundred pounds. From that point the trips were not requests. He was in a flat belonging to a woman in her fifties with a heroin dependency, who had not invited any of them in and could not get them out.

When the police found him he had drugs concealed on him and gave a false name. He was charged with possession with intent to supply. Nobody asked why a boy from a city ninety miles away was in that flat, and Daniel did not volunteer it, because by then he believed he was a dealer rather than a child who had been trafficked.

[The section 45 defence](#) was raised eleven months later, by a duty solicitor who noticed the geography.

Marta, thirty-one

Marta answered an advertisement for hotel work in England, posted in her own language on a social media group for people from her town. The agency was polite and

professional. They arranged her travel and told her the cost would come out of her first month's wages.

She arrived to find there was no hotel. There was a house shared by eleven people and a van that collected them at half past four each morning for shifts at a food-processing plant and, at weekends, on farms.

Her wages were paid into an account she never saw. Deductions were made for rent, for the van, for food, for the travel debt that never got smaller, and for administration that was never explained. In fourteen months she received cash three times.

Her passport was held for safekeeping. She was told this was normal. When she asked for it she was reminded, pleasantly, that her family knew where she was working and would be very disappointed to hear she had caused trouble.

Marta was not locked in. She could have walked out of that house on any day. She had no documents, no money, no English, no idea of the name of the town, and a belief — carefully installed — that the police would deport her and tell her family why.

She was identified when a nurse at a walk-in centre, seeing an untreated hand injury and a man who insisted on answering every question for her, asked to speak to Marta alone.

What to Do If You Suspect Someone Is Being Trafficked

Most people who see something say nothing, and the reason is almost always the same. They are not certain, and they are frightened of causing trouble over nothing.

You do not need to be certain. You are not being asked to investigate, prove anything or decide whether a crime has occurred. You are being asked to pass on what you saw, so that someone whose job it is can put your piece next to the other pieces. Yours may well be the fourth report about that address.

What helps is the detail you actually observed rather than what you concluded. The address. The vehicle and its registration if you have it. The times people come and go. How many of them there are. What state they appeared to be in. If you believe someone is in immediate danger, call 999 and say so.

What harms is intervention. Do not confront the person you think is in control, because the consequences will land on the victim rather than on you. Do not mention to anyone at the premises that you have reported anything. Do not attempt a rescue, offer a lift, or take someone home, however strongly you feel it.

And do not press a suspected victim for their story. They may have been told for months that the police will deport them or hurt their mother, and what they tell you may be the script their trafficker taught them. Someone insisting they are fine is not evidence that they are.

If a person does approach you, listen to them, promise nothing you cannot deliver, and take them nowhere. Tell them that help exists and that you will contact the Modern Slavery Helpline or the police on their behalf if they will let you. Then do it.

For Parents and Carers

The recruitment of children now happens largely through a screen, and it does not announce itself. Fake job and modelling offers, gaming contacts who become confidants, older friends who exist only online, and messages that move quickly from a public platform to a private one are the ordinary route.

What to watch for is change without explanation. New trainers, a new phone, or money nobody can account for. A second phone. Going missing and returning without saying where from. Being found in a town nobody can explain. A sudden shift in language, dress, attitude or friendship group. Secrecy about who is messaging. Injuries brushed off.

What tends not to work is confiscating the phone and demanding answers, because it removes your visibility and confirms to your child that you are the problem. What tends to work better is staying in the conversation, making it clear that they will not be in trouble with you whatever they tell you, and getting advice early rather than waiting until you are certain.

If a child is missing, report it immediately and say plainly that you are worried about exploitation. That phrase changes how the report is handled.

Who to Contact

If someone is in immediate danger, call 999 and say clearly that you believe a person is being held or exploited.

For anything that is not an emergency, the [Modern Slavery Helpline](#) on 08000 121 700 takes calls around the clock, from the public, from victims and from professionals, and you do not have to give your name. The police non-emergency line is 101.

If your concern is about wages, working conditions or a labour provider, the [Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority](#) investigates exactly that. If you would rather say nothing about who you are, [Crimestoppers](#) takes information anonymously on 0800 555 111. Where a child is involved, the [NSPCC](#) helpline on 0808 800 5000 will take the call, and the charity [Unseen](#) runs an app that lets you report what you have seen without speaking to anyone at all.

One thing worth holding on to. Every one of those numbers exists because at some point someone who wasn't sure picked up a phone anyway.

Support Organisations

[The Salvation Army](#) holds the government contract for supporting adult victims of modern slavery in England and Wales, and is the route through which most support is arranged following a referral.

[Unseen](#) runs the Modern Slavery Helpline alongside safe houses and outreach work, and produces some of the most useful public guidance available.

[Hope for Justice](#) works on identification and long-term survivor support, and was central to Operation Fort.

[The Medaille Trust](#) provides safe housing and outreach across the UK.

[Anti-Slavery International](#) works on prevention and policy at an international level.

[Migrant Help](#), [Barnardo's](#) and the [NSPCC](#) are first responders and support providers in their own areas, and Barnardo's in particular does substantial work with children affected by criminal exploitation.

Glossary

Conclusive grounds decision — the second and final decision in the National Referral Mechanism, determining whether a person is formally recognised as a victim of modern slavery.

County lines — the supply of drugs from an urban centre to smaller towns using a dedicated mobile phone number, with the transport and risk pushed onto children and vulnerable adults.

Cuckooing — taking over the home of a vulnerable person to use as a base for drug dealing or other criminal activity.

Debt bondage — control through a debt that the victim can never repay, usually inflated arbitrarily and never fully explained.

Duty to notify — the requirement under section 52 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 for specified public authorities in England and Wales to notify the Home Office of potential victims.

First responder — an organisation authorised to refer a potential victim into the National Referral Mechanism.

National Referral Mechanism (NRM) — the framework through which the UK identifies and supports victims of modern slavery.

Reasonable grounds decision — the first decision in the National Referral Mechanism, made on a lower threshold, which triggers the recovery period.

Recovery period — the protected period following a positive reasonable grounds decision, during which a person is entitled to support.

Section 45 defence — the statutory defence under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 for victims who commit offences as a result of their exploitation.

Smuggling — facilitating illegal entry into a country, a crime committed against the state, distinct from trafficking.

About Kulturalism

Kulturalism® is a public interest community safety watchdog and social enterprise working across community safety, criminal justice, knife crime, county lines, women's safety and prison reform. We publish free and low-cost handbooks for people navigating systems that were not designed to be navigated, alongside research, advocacy and submissions to public bodies.

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Sources

The UK figures in this guide are drawn from the Home Office publication Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics UK, end of year summary 2025, published 19 February 2026. Global estimates of the numbers in modern slavery are from the Walk Free Global Slavery Index, and the figures on profits from forced labour are from the International Labour Organization. Details of Operation Fort are drawn from reporting by Hope for Justice and West Midlands Police, and the Operation Orochi figures from the Metropolitan Police. The law described is the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. Details of county lines operations in Norfolk are drawn from BBC News reporting on joint Norfolk Constabulary and Metropolitan Police operations.

A Note on This Guide

This guide is for educational and awareness purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. Anyone facing criminal proceedings, an immigration decision or a referral decision should seek advice from a qualified solicitor.

Figures cited are the most recent available at the time of writing. Law and guidance in this area change frequently, and readers should check the current position before relying on any statement here.

Kulturalism® is led by a criminology practitioner with two decades of direct work in disadvantaged communities, across courts, crisis services, antisocial behaviour, knife crime, county lines and modern slavery. Where this guide describes how exploitation unfolds in practice, and what helps or harms when you encounter it, that comes from that experience as well as published sources.