

# Police not recording most UK slavery cases as crimes, says report

Anti-slavery commissioner says victims are not receiving justice because too many cases are never investigated

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UK police forces are failing victims of modern slavery by not recording what happens to them as crimes, meaning many cases are never investigated, the independent anti-slavery commissioner has said in his first annual report.

Kevin Hyland, whose job was created under last year's Modern Slavery Act, said just over a quarter of the 3,000-plus slavery cases identified in England and Wales last year under the national referral mechanism (NRM) for recording the offence resulted in crimes recorded by police.

The situation was similarly bad in Scotland, Hyland noted in his report, although the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) logged every one of the offences referred to it.

This meant too many police forces were failing victims, Hyland said. "When NRM referrals are not recorded as crimes, investigations are not launched and victims do not receive the justice and support that they both need and deserve."

The report identified some areas in which anti-slavery procedures had improved but said a series of other areas needed improvement and there were "too many gaps in the system for victims to fall through", especially once they left supported accommodation.

Hyland's biggest concern was the failure by police to properly record slavery referrals. Among English and Welsh forces, he found, 3,146 NRM referrals brought just 884 recordings of slavery crimes, or 28% of the total. This amounted to "chronic weaknesses" in recording the crime, Hyland said.

More than half of the English and Welsh forces had difficulties answering whether any referrals via the NRM had resulted in a crime record, while four could not find their internal records about NRM cases.

In Scotland the situation was, if anything, worse, the report found, with police forces having a policy - since changed - that slavery crimes would only be recorded if there were “conclusive grounds” connected to the NRM. In contrast, the PSNI logged 100% of NRM referrals in 2015-16.

Matters were not all bad, Hyland said. In the foreword to the report, he wrote: “Evidence I have collected does demonstrate that some UK police forces are taking a proactive approach to combating modern slavery through the development of bespoke units, quality assurance mechanisms and training.”

He added: “I am disappointed, however, that many instances of substandard modern slavery crime recording remain.”

Hyland said he had raised the issue with the National Crime Agency and the National Police Chiefs’ Council.

Shaun Sawyer, who leads on anti-slavery for the NPCC, said police wanted to do more to tackle the “vile crime”.

“This complex and cross-border-type offence presents the police with unique challenges,” he said. “However, it does not excuse the gap between national referrals and recorded crime in some areas. We also believe there are many victims of modern slavery who are yet to be identified.”

In a statement following the report, Theresa May said the government was committed to tackling the issue.

“So let us send out this message,” the prime minister said. “To the victims of modern slavery: we will not ignore your plight. We will not turn away. We will not shut our eyes and pretend your suffering does not exist.

“We will work tirelessly, relentlessly pursuing the perpetrators of these appalling crimes so that victims of slavery can go free. And my message to these criminals is simply this: we are coming after you.”

According to the report, there are believed to be up to 13,000 victims of modern slavery currently in the UK, including domestic slaves, forced agricultural workers and people exploited in brothels.

Hyland said a visit to Italy and Greece this year had uncovered “strong evidence that the migration crisis is being used by human trafficking networks to target and exploit the most vulnerable, and that there is a need for urgent action”.

Hyland also noted concerns about the potential numbers of women and girls trafficked from Nigeria for sexual slavery.

In 2015, more than 5,600 Nigerian women and girls arrived in Italy by sea, almost four times as many as in 2014, the report said. The majority of these came from the Nigerian state of Edo.

Hyland also highlighted the issue of homeless people being exploited by traffickers for what is described as work in the informal economy. He said a number of them were “being held in exploitation and slave-like conditions across the UK”.

The report warned: “As there is currently no national evidence base or recording mechanisms for this phenomenon, and despite the best efforts of organisations working in this field, the response to date has not been effective.”

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