

## COVID-19 and Modern Slavery: A Research Response

COVID-19 represents a large and sudden exogenous shock to the world. The pandemic itself and the measures being undertaken to slow its pace and effect have short, medium and long term impacts on the problem of modern slavery. We have formulated research approaches to understanding and responding to the effects of the pandemic on some of the world's most vulnerable people. This represents an early-stage research agenda for anti-slavery responses to COVID-19, and a call for a coordinated, systematic and inter-disciplinary research effort.

We mapped potential research responses across the short, medium and long term, and across the three main themes laid out in another early response: [“The Impact of COVID-19 on Modern Slavery”](#) (March 27, 2020) by James Cockayne and Angharad Smith for Delta 8.7, a project of the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (a Rights Lab partner).

In suggesting potential questions, this agenda tries to formulate a research response that can contribute to the understanding of, and response to, the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts for modern slavery, including by supporting the design, development and adoption of new policies and interventions, and by gathering critical data and resources quickly for future research use. The research agenda includes questions about modern slavery in the UK and globally.

Although this is a response from modern slavery researchers rather than from frontline professionals, we focus on work that could help policy-makers and service-providers address the multi-faceted challenges that the pandemic presents for anti-slavery and anti-trafficking work in the coming weeks and months. The Rights Lab will continue to canvas anti-slavery stakeholders to check that these questions are the right ones—and that they will deliver 'operational' as well as research data. We will do this with sensitivity to the risk that asking for input from stakeholders may distract them from their crucial roles in responding to the crisis.

We know that to answer many of the questions will require access to knowledge or data from frontline professionals. Many cannot be answered without collaboration—for example with law enforcement on questions about organised crime and offender activity. Organisations in the field will have access to the data and will already be working to better understand these issues. We are keen to offer help and collaboration, if that is useful, and do not intend to duplicate efforts. Anyone with collaboration requests, ideas or suggestions can contact us at [rightslab@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:rightslab@nottingham.ac.uk).

The suggested research questions are indicative and not exhaustive. We know that different stakeholders will have other questions. The agenda will therefore continue to grow as a live document. We will work alongside researchers to identify early findings and disseminate them as short briefings to anti-slavery stakeholders who need them quickly. We will upload these briefings at our website.

Different stakeholders will prioritise particular areas. The potential research questions can be clustered together in different ways. Many of the questions focus on how to protect people in vulnerable circumstances from the disease itself and on trying to understand the impact of anti-COVID measures on people at risk of exploitation. Some crucial and urgent questions revolve around very real difficulties for victims and survivors of slavery, including those resulting from the current responses to the pandemic. We have listed these questions first in each of the 9 categories, to acknowledge that they will be a priority for many stakeholders.

Going forward we will cluster and answer some of these questions, and will work with other research organisations and anti-slavery stakeholders on this effort. We will post updates. We link to our evidence submissions about modern slavery and COVID-19 at our website, alongside other early responses on COVID-19's implications for modern slavery.

This initial research agenda was created with input from across the Rights Lab's research team and from some of its partners: UNU-CPR (James Cockayne), the Survivor Alliance (Minh Dang), the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner's Office (Jenna Teasdale), Freedom Fund (Yuki Lo), Baroness Lola Young of Hornsey, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery (Urmila Bhoola), the Home Office Modern Slavery Unit (Phoebe Blagg), the FCO Modern Slavery Team (Sarah Boardman), the DFID Migration and Modern Slavery Department (Pam Vallance), the FCO Forced Marriage Unit (Sarah Timmis), and the University of Sheffield (Elizabeth Such).

## COVID-19 and Modern Slavery: Research Questions

### 1. Short Term (<6 months)

COVID-19 presents the world with a public health crisis. [Epidemiological modelling](#) of the virus show the different patterns of its spread across different categories of suppression and containment responses from governments, as well as capacity estimates with respect to public and private healthcare provision.

Responses to COVID-19 may divert state resources away from other social issues in the short term. Although new state spend on economic protection may help with an ongoing anti-slavery response, there may still be gaps in provision for the most vulnerable in society, which includes those still trapped in modern slavery as well as survivors of modern slavery.

In the UK, provisions in the 2015 Modern Slavery Act on support and care for victims may be compromised. The commitment to support under the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) may be difficult to maintain. This risks driving more survivors out of care and potentially back into slavery. NHS staff and mental health-care workers will be stretched to capacity and may divert their attention away from other concerns such as modern slavery. Economic contraction and reallocation of resources may undermine the work of third-sector organisations on modern slavery. The attention and resources of law enforcement and local government resources may also be diverted from anti-slavery work.

There may be opportunities for anti-slavery actors to help catalyse positive policy development, including around human rights principles supporting resilience to slavery, in response to the pandemic. There may also be new ways of working, introduced by necessity, that should be recognised now and taken forward as longer-term innovations.

#### Research questions:

##### *Section 1a: Impacts for those already in slavery and for survivors*

1. What are the immediate physical and mental health risks to victims and survivors of modern slavery, how do those health risks differ across exploitation type/demographics/immigration status, and are victims and survivors at heightened risk compared to others—for example due to the loss of physical and communicative freedom, or being coerced to work against government advice? How can these risks be mitigated, for example among factory workers who live in high-density hostels?
2. Have COVID-19 measures interrupted or accelerated modes, methods and forms of trafficking and enslavement—are there any emergent trends?
3. What is the full nature and extent of any negative impact on support for victims and survivors of modern slavery in the UK and other countries, and what are the immediate risks for survivors—and their children—with regards to housing, education, and other essential services? What are victims/survivors saying about changes in the way that support has been delivered in the UK, and what are some new ways of working that could be implemented in the area of victim/survivor support?
4. Are victims and survivors receiving public health information in an accessible format and if not, are they at risk of not getting help and treatment and/or of being a conduit for spreading the virus? What new ways of communicating can better reach vulnerable communities?
5. What impact have social isolation measures had on victims in the UK, whether or not they are in NRM accommodation? Has the likelihood of victims seeking help been impacted by COVID-19—are there new barriers/have existing barriers been exacerbated? How can the anti-slavery community tackle the problem that social distancing/isolation may inhibit the abilities of victims and survivors to access help (e.g. call helplines and access NGOs)?
6. What urgent steps can governments and NGOs take to minimize the sanitary risks in camps where migrants and refugees working in forced labour conditions are located?

7. What are the likely shifts in opportunities and incentives for organised criminals looking to profit from enslavement—including as traffickers respond to closed borders and country lockdowns—and how can law enforcement anti-trafficking efforts best anticipate and intervene?
8. How far is human trafficking an entry point for infections and hence a public health risk, as it bypasses compulsory screening and quarantine at border entry points, and how can this be factored into the COVID response? How can we compare regular and irregular forms of entry in terms of disease transmission?
9. What impact are social and political responses to the pandemic having on civil society organisations' ability to undertake existing anti-slavery interventions globally, and how can these impacts be managed, both upstream and downstream?
10. What are the immediate unintended consequences of containment responses for those enslaved at sea and how can these be mitigated?
11. Are environmentally degrading sectors that are known to rely on modern slavery continuing their operations at a time in which countries are locked-down (e.g. logging, mining, brick manufacturing) and is this an indicator of illegal activity, including modern slavery?
12. How does the inability to groom and threaten physically impact on the measures used by offenders to mobilise county lines victims while in social isolation? If drugs are not being dealt 'as usual,' then if/how are perpetrators maintaining control, grooming county-lines victims remotely / online (potentially as sleeper cells) in preparation to a return to normality in the near future?

*Section 1b: Increased vulnerability to enslavement*

13. What are the likely impacts for specific groups who are vulnerable to slavery, for example those with learning difficulties, migrants, children, and homeless people, and how can we mitigate those impacts?
14. How is COVID-19 changing the demand for labour in sectors that are high risk for exploitation in the UK? Is there a displacement of exploitation from sectors where businesses have closed to sectors where there is increased demand?
15. How can we track and mitigate the risk that social distancing and isolation increases vulnerability to modern slavery?
16. What immediate impacts are reduced income-generating opportunities for businesses and workers having on the risk of modern slavery and how can these be mitigated? For example, what alternative livelihood programmes currently exist that can be expanded at scale in the least amount of time, to reduce vulnerability to slavery during a period of high unemployment?
17. What mitigations can reduce the impact of 'lock down' on both live-in and live-out domestic workers who are vulnerable to slavery? Where do domestic workers go to access support and can understanding this help to identify potential victims?
18. What impact is COVID-19 having on trafficking patterns into the UK, including as captured by NRM data on the nationality of victims, and how can any increasing risks for particular victim profiles (nationality, age, gender) be mitigated?
19. What is the impact of removing children from education in the UK on recruitment to county lines and childhood criminal/sexual exploitation, and how can negative impacts be mitigated?
20. What interim measures will help vulnerable children around the world return to schools when they reopen so that they do not become full-time labourers in the longer-term?
21. What sectors may be at increased risk of slavery because of surges in demand for goods and services (e.g. food, ventilators, personal protective equipment), will these be the ones where we know there have been labour abuse allegations in the past, and how can these risks be addressed? Does the premium on speed mean additional risk? Can we identify likely demand over time and predict potential risks (with proposed mitigations)?
22. How have the purchasing practices of business and public sector buyers changed in response to COVID-19? What happens when companies source from new countries (because of restrictions in traditional supplier countries)? What has the impact been and how can we mitigate the modern slavery risks?
23. Will the non-supply of seasonal labour to the farming sector, e.g. from Eastern Europe, increase the risk of the use of enslaved labour in the UK, and do new initiatives by businesses in the sector to bring EU nationals to the UK during COVID-19 help to mitigate this risk?

24. What will be the implications for modern slavery risk in the UK's road freight transport and warehousing sectors if regulations around road freight transport and warehousing are relaxed to increase drivers' and workers' maximum hours, and how can an increased risk be mitigated?
25. How are the managers of (predominantly private) care homes responding to staff shortages, and what safeguards do care home managers have in place to ensure labour agencies are compliant with Care Quality Commission regulations for recruitment and selection?
26. What impact does the increased engagement of community volunteers make on vulnerability to slavery, and how are safeguarding standards being applied in this context? How far has modern slavery awareness-raising been integrated into community volunteers' training and can we ensure any such practises last beyond the current crisis?
27. What changes are necessary in UK foreign and development policy in response to increasing vulnerability to slavery overseas, as a result of the virus and its economic effects?
28. What can existing data on the relationship between other diseases (e.g. yellow fever and cholera) and modern slavery (including the relationship of both to the informal economy, ecological destruction, conflict and other population vulnerabilities) tell us about the likely impact of COVID-19 on slavery vulnerability in the Global South in the coming months, and how to mitigate that impact?

#### *Section 1c: Anti-slavery efforts*

29. What interventions can the UK government make now to prevent the most perverse outcomes of resource diversion and mitigate the pandemic's impact on the capacity of the police and other front-line responders to respond to modern slavery (including on specific cases, connecting survivors to support services, and engaging with training and capacity-building)?
30. What is the multilateral/United Nations response to COVID-19 in relation to modern slavery risk, including in its evidence and analysis of trends and in its policy and programming, and how can this response be strengthened?
31. What are the impacts for the work of the UK's multi-sector local/regional anti-slavery partnerships, and for the faith response to modern slavery, and how can these groups adapt their anti-slavery efforts?
32. What effect does social distancing and isolation have on public vigilance and awareness about modern slavery, and on the ability of key workers (including teachers, social workers, nurses, midwives) to spot warning signs for modern slavery, including forced marriage? For example, if there are dips in calls to helplines, is this partly due to victims coming into less contact with safeguarding professionals (teachers, doctors, social services) who often flag issues? How can service-providers enhance the ability of victims, including those trapped in forced marriages, to reach out for support when they are in the home with perpetrators? What would be the best approach for potential targeted awareness-raising campaigns, including those aimed at raising awareness with volunteers and first responders?
33. How are businesses adjusting their anti-slavery efforts (for example in response to emerging threats)? Where has maintaining anti-slavery activity been challenging, and why? How are businesses horizon-scanning for new modern slavery risks—for example, if they have paused production and cancelled orders with overseas suppliers, do they foresee challenges in restarting production? How are they understanding risks around the recruitment of workers?
34. How is the anti-slavery community responding and shifting focus, for example as evidenced by social media monitoring of organisations' priorities, and what can we learn from previous pandemics and disasters to facilitate rapid knowledge mobilisation to the anti-slavery arena?
35. Are philanthropists already switching focus from anti-slavery responses to combatting COVID-19, and with what impact on modern slavery programmes?
36. What would be the potential impact of including the condition of having robust anti-slavery strategies in government loans and other support for companies during the crisis?
37. Does the Coronavirus Bill 2020 have the potential to disrupt anti-slavery efforts, including for local authorities?
38. How can anti-slavery (and development) actors use this moment as a catalyst for positive policy development, including through recognizing connections between slavery, poverty, physical and mental health and COVID-19?

## 2. Medium Term (<12 months)

In the medium term, it is likely that COVID-19 will bring large-scale economic contraction and downturn, high rates of unemployment and restructuring of national economies. Short term gains in some sectors (e.g. home electronics and books) may flatten and other sectors (e.g. hospitality and leisure) may struggle to recover.

Economic downturn may lead to a corporate debt crisis, financial contagion and an emerging markets crisis. This risks leading to a longer-term collapse of global demand and value chains, and a shrivelling of value chains back to the Global North. Damage to trade flows that puts pressure on Global South countries would hit labour-intensive industries, creating incentives to cut labour costs. This may increase both supply and demand for forced labour across a large number of sectors.

State capacity variations, which will partly explain the ability to respond to COVID-19, may shape countries' abilities to continue responding to modern slavery. The governance of anti-slavery may be damaged. There may also be new opportunities for integrating human rights principles and protections into distinct areas of anti-slavery policy and practice.

### Research questions

#### *Section 2a: Impacts for those already in slavery and for survivors*

39. What has been the relationship between an increase in unemployment after COVID-19 and levels of modern slavery in different sectors and countries?
40. Globally, what has been the impact on anti-slavery efforts in ports that assess for the exploitation of fishers and seafarers?
41. What has been the impact of social distancing on modern slavery offending, and will remote methods of recruitment and grooming prove to be more financially lucrative and less risky, therefore facilitating a shift in criminal offending patterns even after social distancing is over?
42. What are the effects of the economic contraction on the economic causes of different forms of modern slavery?
43. Did any countries' moratoriums on weddings during social distancing led to fewer forced marriages, or to more (i.e. did it lead to more forced marriages 'under the radar' with the removal of the protocols currently in place at registry offices)?
44. What coping mechanisms are families in slavery/vulnerable to slavery using in response and what will be the subsequent impact of these mechanisms?
45. What has been the full impact on self-employed survivor leaders who have lost anti-slavery consultancy opportunities due to programme cancellations or postponement, and therefore on the inclusion of survivor voice in anti-slavery work?
46. As the global demand for manufactured goods falls, how can public investment help to retrain workers for other occupations with less slavery risk?

#### *Section 2b: Increased vulnerability to enslavement*

47. What is the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on workers vulnerable to slavery and trafficking (such as seasonal, migrant, gig economy and casual workers), and has there been increased vulnerability to modern slavery through a shift towards more precarious forms of work—how can the anti-slavery community (including, in the UK, the Director of Labour Market Exploitation) mitigate this impact?
48. What specific and known risk factors for modern slavery have been exacerbated by COVID-19 in the UK and which government departments and civil society organisations can be supported to reduce each of them?
49. How can data science, complex systems modelling, remote-sensing and AI/machine-learning help to identify and respond to those risk factors?
50. What are the impacts of any reduced physical and mental health support on vulnerability to enslavement, among other impacts of social distancing, how does this vary across forms of slavery, and how can any impacts be mitigated?
51. What solutions can the anti-slavery community design to the potential problem of financial stress in vulnerable communities leading to the early marriage and trafficking of girls?

52. What is the on-going impact of COVID-19 on modern slavery and human trafficking patterns in conflict and humanitarian settings?
53. What is the impact of increased international border vigilance on migration practices and pathways, including on the rate of unsafe migration and internal trafficking?
54. What disruptions have occurred to the system of transnational migrant labour, including for whole value chains (especially in agriculture), and how can we mitigate the risks of disruptions?
55. How has the cancellation of orders by global businesses and the suspension of production in particular sectors raised the risk of modern slavery, through its impacts on vulnerable workers in the Global South, and what mitigations would lower this risk?
56. Has the closure of legitimate businesses, due to the economic impact of COVID-19, led to a growth in the shadow economy, and how can we mitigate any increased modern slavery risk that this is creating?
57. What gaps in social care provision are emerging in the labour market, and how are care managers, direct payment recipients and private-funders seeking to fill them? If informal labour intermediaries are emerging in the care sector, how do they operate, who is using them, and what mitigations would lower the risk of modern slavery?

#### *Section 2c: Anti-slavery efforts*

58. How has reduced government revenue impacted decision-making and policy formation on modern slavery, and how can government be encouraged to prioritise the protection of vulnerable populations from the risk of slavery?
59. What were the impacts of reduced oversight capacity by governments, the media and civil society on modern slavery, and how can we bolster this capacity going forward?
60. How have States balanced competing human rights/anti-slavery and public health interests in their COVID-19 policies/responses, and what would a better balance look like?
61. Are there any lessons we can learn for integrating human rights principles and protections and/or the factors supporting resilience to slavery into distinct areas of anti-slavery policy and practice, and for testing intersectional SDG policy-making?
62. How have social and political responses to the pandemic impacted anti-slavery civil society organisations' existing income and ability to secure funding going forward, and how can anti-slavery NGOs—alongside other parts of the NGO sector—rebuild momentum?
63. How did social distancing and isolation change the ways in which people build and maintain social connections, and can these technologies and approaches can be adapted to promote survivor recovery, enhance survivor wellbeing, and support social integration and community-building for people vulnerable to modern slavery going forward?
64. How did COVID-19 measures change community bonds, outreach, and approaches to caring, and can any positive patterns be maintained to support ongoing resilience to modern slavery?
65. Are anti-slavery efforts consolidating around known hotspots as a result of COVID-19, and if so then what adjustments can these efforts make so as not to ignore areas of the world or sectors where slavery is commonly believed to be less prevalent?
66. In the wake of changes to the demand for manufactured goods, how can brands be encouraged to consolidate and shorten their supply chains?

### **3. Long Term (>12 months)**

Data on the pandemic will improve with time. These data, of the kind being collected by Johns Hopkins University and others, will enable researchers to model larger global processes that relate socio-economic factors with COVID-19. The drivers of extreme vulnerability to COVID-19 may be similar to those that are at the heart of slavery's root causes. It will be possible to complete an econometric modelling of the time-series and cross-national variation in the spread of the pandemic. This kind of modelling can be conducted at national, regional, and international levels.

The response to the pandemic may also generate policy innovations and shifts in social perspectives that improve the global community's abilities to respond to modern slavery in the long term.

## Research Questions

### *Section 3a: Impacts for those already in slavery and for survivors*

67. Have the modern slavery risks and burdens exacerbated by COVID-19 had particular impacts for women and girls that need mitigation?
68. What, if any, long-term shifts in modern slavery offending patterns and methods are evident as a result of the virus, including in the UK?
69. Has COVID-19, and an increased focus on supply chains by the media, led to changes in consumer attitudes about how and where products are made? Are there any changing dynamics between businesses and consumers in relation to reputational issues (e.g. how businesses have protected staff in the UK or overseas)?
70. What has the pandemic taught us about the anti-slavery strengths and shortcomings of labour protections and standards for vulnerable workers, and how do these need to be reshaped for the future?
71. Have company Modern Slavery Statements reflected attempts to reduce the risk of new purchasing practises, reduced orders or cancelled orders that may have put extreme pressure on suppliers?
72. How will a possibly rapid economic recovery impact on modern slavery prevalence and anti-slavery responses? What happens when industries go back into production?

### *Section 3b: Increased vulnerability to enslavement*

73. What preventative measures can be put in place to support the physical and mental health of survivors, including a reconfiguration of services during health emergencies?
74. How effective were States' responses during the crisis in protecting vulnerable people from the virus and from increased slavery risk, and what learning can States take forward for their long-term anti-slavery response?
75. Are the socio-economic factors that explain the variation in the virus' spread over time and across space similar or different to the risk factors relating to modern slavery, and how can this analysis help shape anti-slavery work in the future?
76. What are the potential shifts in country trafficking profiles during economic downturn, and what are the necessary adjustments in public services (including policing), legislation and regulation?
77. What have been the long-term effects of any global economic contraction on the economic factors for forced marriage, particularly on forced marriage as a route for legal migration (reluctant sponsorship)?
78. What shifts in social perspectives have emerged from the response to COVID-19, and what opportunities and challenges do these present for work to reduce vulnerability to slavery (e.g. higher regard for 'low skilled' jobs and workers, higher prioritisation of measures to reduce environmental degradation)?
79. How can any positive policy shifts be maintained and embedded in regulatory frameworks to help reduce vulnerability to slavery (e.g. wage subsidies, worker protections, moves towards policies like universal basic income, a shift towards greater attention to responsible business conduct, and increased public spending on healthcare systems)?

### *Section 3c: Anti-slavery efforts*

80. What are the key institutions underpinning global anti-slavery governance responses and how has the pandemic impacted upon them?
81. If foreign aid and foreign direct investment has addressed critical gaps in country capabilities to deal with pandemics, then in what way are these capabilities the same as those needed to combat modern slavery?
82. What changes have occurred in Official Development Assistance (ODA) aimed at combatting slavery, including average spend per country on development aid?
83. How has an economic downturn impacted philanthropic investment in anti-slavery efforts?
84. What impact did the pandemic have on funding for civil society organisations working on modern slavery, and how can the anti-slavery community build and rebuild momentum in response to potentially reduced funding?

85. What has been the impact of changes in anti-slavery work from larger prevention and education initiatives and in-person training sessions to small group settings and e-learning, and can any of these changes be taken forward in positive ways?
86. Are there positive shifts in state and community responses to modern slavery, given the shift to valuing community and volunteer efforts during the crisis, and can these be scaled up?
87. How do the Sustainable Development Goals intersect in new ways in a post-COVID world and how does SDG 8.7 feature in these intersections?