



Modern slavery in local media

Rights Lab briefing on the findings of an academic study by Dr Jen Birks and Dr Alison Gardner, Sept 2019ⁱ

Local media reporting on modern slavery is increasing and gaining nuance resulting in greater public recognition of modern slavery as a local issue. However, inaccurate stereotypes of modern slavery remain entrenched, and concerns regarding inadequate support provision and 'hostile environment' immigration policies can lead to public inaction.

Key research findings

1. Reporting on modern slavery in the East Midlands local press increased sixfold between 2016 and 2017, correlated with a higher volume of court reporting and local anti-slavery campaigns.
2. The focus of the reporting has noticeably shifted from a disproportionate concentration on sexual exploitation to cases of forced labour.
3. However, even among focus group participants with a good pre-existing knowledge of modern slavery, it is still largely seen as a distant issue, rather than a local one.
4. Only a small percentage of human interest stories on the issue featured survivors' voices and focus group findings show that there is a desire for information about pre and post-exploitation experiences that is not being met.
5. Focus group participants did not find 'spot the signs' [of modern slavery] campaigns printed in a newspaper article helpful and expressed concerns about reporting suspicions to the police because of negative consequences related to immigration and lack of appropriate support.

Why is this important?

Previous academic research has largely concentrated on modern slavery in the national mediaⁱⁱ, and there has been little examination of the role of the local press. However, local newspapers, while in overall decline, still have an important presence in community life and are often trusted sources of information. Moreover, events and awareness raising are more likely to attain local rather than national coverage, making local media an important asset to anti-trafficking initiatives.

Despite an increase in reporting overall and a more nuanced portrayal from local media, this research shows that sympathetic members of the public may still be reluctant to take action, for instance in response to simplistic 'spot the signs' campaigns, due to concerns for victims' welfare. A key concern expressed was that reporting modern slavery suspicions to the police would potentially lead to deportations of victims, suggesting that the Government's 'hostile environment' immigration policies are actively undermining attempts to enlist the public's help in combatting modern slavery.

Recommendations for local newspaper editors and reporters

- Move beyond basic 'beat' reporting and critically engage with the issue of modern slavery to identify and dispel common myths and entrenched stereotypes.
- Make efforts to centre survivors' voices in human interest stories on modern slavery whenever possible, including more detailed stories of recruitment and survivor empowerment post-exploitation.
- Investigate wider causes of slavery and exploitation, such as a neglect of basic labour rights, and highlight responsible local employers. In addition to highlighting the public's role in 'spotting the signs', increase the emphasis on self-reporting.

Recommendations for the UK Government

- Assess the impact of the 'hostile environment' policies and rhetoric on antislavery awareness raising campaigns and public confidence in reporting potential cases.
- Implement a 'firewall' between the police and UK immigration forces to encourage both members of the public to report concerns and victims to 'self report'.ⁱⁱⁱ

Research overview

After undertaking a content analysis of local newspaper coverage of modern slavery in the East Midlands region, focus groups were conducted to determine the effect media reporting was having on the public's understanding of the issue at a local level.

The study examined the five main newspapers in the region (excluding the county of Rutland) over a two year reporting period from January 2016 - December 2017 with a total of 148 articles reviewed.

Three focus groups were undertaken involving 17 participants in total, all residents of Nottingham, to understand how local coverage modifies—and sometimes reinforces—existing views. The participants were divided into clusters based on their existing understanding of modern slavery. Two of the groups were entirely White British while a third was more diverse.

Local newspaper reporting of modern slavery increasing and improving overall

In 2017 there was a sixfold increase in reporting on modern slavery initiatives in the papers reviewed. This correlates with a general uptick in attention the issue has received since the introduction of the 2015 Modern Slavery Act^{iv} and is correlated with an increase in local anti-slavery campaigning activity.

But it was also found that a gradual shift in both terminology and nuance on the issue has occurred. In 2016, modern slavery was largely raised in passing as one of the new challenges for police forces to tackle in the context of limited resources; whereas in 2017, there was a dramatic increase in specific cases (from under a tenth of overall volume to over half), and a shift from arrests (down from almost half of crime-focused volume to 15.5%) to court reporting (up from 1.9% to 52.4%).

Sexual exploitation went from being mentioned in 71.3% of the articles in 2016 to just 9.6% in 2017. This was largely attributed to a move away from police sources, whose definition of modern slavery would include sexual exploitation, towards court reporting where big forced labour cases involved construction and agriculture were covered at length.

Reluctance to report modern slavery concerns to the police

There was a notable reluctance among focus group participants to report modern slavery concerns to the police, especially among those most sympathetic to potential victims, because of immigration issues. A prevailing attitude in the focus groups was that while modern slavery was obviously bad, victims may not want to be 'discovered' and risk deportation or homelessness. Some participants believed those most affected probably saw the police as corrupt and therefore respected their decisions not to report as rational. Many expressed more enthusiasm for models that empowered victims to 'self-report' rather than those that put the onus on members of the public or cast them in a surveillance role.

'Spot the signs' campaigns too vague

Focus group participants expressed a lack of confidence in being able to detect incidents of modern slavery using the 'spot the signs' guidelines after being asked to view a reprinted version in a newspaper article. They deemed the signs too broad, with one participant remarking the warning sign of a person looking unkempt could apply to 'half of Nottingham'.

Furthermore, some also expressed concerns that they would be perceived as prejudiced for reporting to the police, for example, large numbers of Eastern Europeans living in one house together.

Participants were also surprised to learn that modern slavery could be associated with 'legitimate' businesses and was not confined to the underworld or black market. Some were particularly outraged to learn companies that brand themselves as ethical had fallen foul of using slave labour, such as a 'free range' egg company.

Strengthening the role of local media

Focus group participants recognised the implications of the UK's 'hostile environment' policy and the importance of employer responsibility, but these received limited attention in the press. Addressing such issues in local and national press and media campaigns could provide a stronger foundation for de-normalising the conditions which allow exploitation to occur, and give greater confidence for those wishing to report abuses

ⁱ J Birks and A Gardner, 'Introducing the Slave Next Door', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 13, 2019, pp. 66-81, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201219135>

ⁱⁱ See, for instance: R Sanford, D E Martínez and R Weitzer, 'Framing Human Trafficking: A content analysis of recent US newspaper articles', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2016, pp. 139–155, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2015.1107341>; A Johnston, B Friedman and M Sobel, 'Framing an Emerging Issue: How US print and broadcast news media covered sex trafficking, 2008–2012', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2015, pp. 235–254, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2014.993876>; and M Sobel, B Friedman and A Johnston, 'Sex Trafficking as a News Story: Evolving structure and reporting strategies', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2017, pp. 43–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2017.1401426>

ⁱⁱⁱ V Dodd, 'Police to Stop Passing On Immigration Status of Crime Victims', *The Guardian*, 7 December 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/dec/07/police-to-stop-passing-on-immigration-status-of-victims>.

^{iv} <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/contents/enacted>.