



Risks & Impacts of Covid-19 for Modern Slavery Survivors in the UK

This briefing provides an overview of key findings from an ongoing [UKRI-funded project](#) to assess the accrued risks, impacts and mitigating responses of Covid-19 for victims and survivors of modern slavery.

To date, the research has involved:

1. **Surveying 102 survivors in the UK and USA in December 2020** to understand the impact of Covid-19 to date, expected future impacts, and their suggestions/requests for how these impacts can be mitigated. This briefing will focus on the responses from UK participants. The full list of survey questions can be found [here](#).
2. A **rapid evidence review** to analyse 106 relevant grey literature sources in the public domain globally between 1st March – 31st October 2020. The evidence review can be read in full [here](#).
3. The **monitoring of strategic communications related to Covid-19 broadcast via Twitter** by anti-slavery organisations and government accounts between January and September 2020. The web monitoring briefing can be read [here](#).

Recognising the limitations of this research data, **the list of risks and impacts discussed in this briefing is not intended to be comprehensive.** Rather, this briefing aims to provide a starting point for further conversations with the UK anti-slavery sector to understand whether these identified risks and impacts reflect the experiences of the wider sector, whether these issues persist as the UK transitions out of the pandemic, and, if so, what action can be taken to address them.

Key areas of risk & impact

In December 2020, 102 individuals who identify as survivors of modern slavery responded to a survey disseminated by [Survivor Alliance](#) focusing on the impact of Covid-19. **56 of these survey respondents resided in the UK** (46 resided in the USA). The countries of origin of UK respondents included Nigeria (40%), Philippines (20%), UK (13%), Albania, Russia, Mongolia, Botswana, Congo, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malawi, and Mauritius. 91% of UK respondents identified as female, 6% as male, and 4% selected the category of 'other'. The **age of UK respondents** ranged from 21 to 59 years, with the average age being 38 years.

A number of key themes were highlighted in the survey data as areas of survivors' lives that had been impacted, to varying degrees, by Covid-19. Additional themes also emerged from the rapid evidence review. These key themes are listed in the table below and are discussed in turn in the following pages.

Psychological health	Legal documentation (including the rights of domestic workers)
Financial status	Digital poverty and exclusion
Physical health – In particular, concerns around Covid-19	Risks to children of online sexual exploitation, trafficking, criminal exploitation and child marriage
Access to support services	Access to information about Covid-19 entitlements
Relationships with wider family & friends	Discrimination towards migrant workers



Psychological health

Overview of survey findings	<p>When asked in a survey in December 2020 how they had been impacted by Covid-19, and provided with a list of 14 pre-selected categories (of which they could select as many as applied), 73% of UK participants indicated that their psychological health had become either somewhat or significantly worse.</p> <p>When asked what they <i>expect</i> the main impacts of Covid-19 to be over the next 6 months (January - June 2021), and provided with a list of 14 categories of impact (of which they could select up to 5 options), 63% of UK survivors selected 'psychological health' as an area that Covid-19 was likely to impact. Psychological health was the most frequently selected category out of the 14 categories of impact.</p>
Supporting evidence from rapid evidence review	<p>In the evidence review, UK sources reported that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Survivors faced issues around accessing mental health services due to reduced capacity and issues of digital poverty.▪ Lockdown, self-isolation and social distancing negatively impacted <i>pre-existing</i> mental health issues and had been a trigger of past traumas.▪ Uncertainty around immigration status had been a source of anxiety for some survivors.▪ The shift to remote support of case workers negatively impacted the mental health of some survivors.▪ Remote support also may have resulted in potential safeguarding issues being missed.▪ Reduced participation in education, work, support groups, volunteering had negatively impacted the mental health of some survivors.▪ Testifying remotely to Home Office officials or to legal representatives without in-person and follow-up support could be traumatic for survivors.
Monitoring of Twitter communications	<p>Only 1.08% of 479 tweets across 64 anti-slavery organisations between January and September 2020 discussed mental health factors. This small number of Twitter communications related to mental health is at odds with the extent to which this theme predominates the survey responses and the evidence review.</p>

Survey participants were asked what they would like people in power (e.g. local government, national government, NGOs or others) to know or to do to address past or future issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Example responses made by survey participants in relation to this issue include:

"Local organisations should have arrange[d] video calls for mental health issues and help, as nobody offered me and I am not comfortable to ask anyone"

"Provide specific helplines and support for Covid-related mental health issues"



Financial status

Overview of survey findings	<p>When asked in the survey in December 2020 how they had been impacted by COVID-19, and provided with a list of 14 pre-selected categories (of which they could select as many as applied), 65% of UK participants indicated that their financial status had become either somewhat or significantly worse.</p> <p>When asked what they <i>expect</i> the main impacts of Covid-19 to be over the next 6 months (January - June 2021), and provided with a list of 14 categories of impact (of which they could select up to 5 options), 55% of UK survivors selected 'financial status' as an area that COVID was likely to impact. Financial status was the third most frequently selected category out of the 14 categories of impact.</p>
Supporting evidence from rapid evidence review	<p>In the evidence review, the financial status of survivors was discussed and included reports that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Partial closures of food banks and baby banks had increased financial pressure on survivors who would normally use these services to supplement financial assistance they receive.▪ Due to rise in cost of essential items, some individuals were unable to afford data or mobile credit.▪ There were challenges accessing universal credit and some survivors experienced delayed payments of financial assistance.▪ Survivors had been impacted by loss of employment including those on zero-hour contracts.
Monitoring of Twitter communications	<p>15.51% (the <i>second highest</i> proportional amount) of 479 tweets across 64 organisations discussed economic factors. Especially prevalent in this category was reference to risks to workers in general, spanning loss of income, unemployment, heightened informality in the labour market, destitution, food shortages: lost income when sick, wage theft, cut backs to hours in low-paid sectors, and risks specific to those self-employed or on zero-hour contracts.</p>

Survey participants were asked what they would like people in power (e.g. local government, national government, NGOs or others) to know or to do to address past or future issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Example responses made by survey participants in relation to this issue include:

"Take into account that the more we stay home the more we get depressed and the bills going up so we need extra money"

"Bonuses for carers"

"Help should be given to families with low income"



Physical health – In particular, concerns around Covid-19

Overview of survey findings	<p>When asked in the survey in December 2020 how they had been impacted by Covid-19, and provided with a list of 14 pre-selected categories (of which they could select as many as applied), 44% of UK participants indicated that their physical health had become either somewhat or significantly worse.</p> <p>When asked what they <i>expect</i> the main impacts of Covid-19 to be over the next 6 months (January - June 2021), and provided with a list of 14 categories of impact (of which they could select up to 5 options), 59% of UK survivors selected 'physical health' as an area that Covid-19 was likely to impact. Physical health was the second most frequently selected category out of the 14 categories of impact.</p>
Supporting evidence from rapid evidence review	<p>In the evidence review, concerns were raised that survivors were disproportionately at risk of contracting Covid-19 due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Overcrowded accommodation where self-isolation and/or social distancing was not possible. ▪ The inability to self-isolate due to financial pressures or lack of government financial assistance. ▪ Pre-existing health conditions, some of which may be connected to either historic and current exploitation. ▪ Delays in initial health screening e.g. for newly arrived unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. • Reluctance to access healthcare for Covid-19 due to fears of deportation, language barriers, unaffordable costs, being controlled by traffickers, and experiences of racism in healthcare.
Monitoring of Twitter communications	<p>14.7 % (the <i>third highest</i> proportional amount) of 479 tweets across 64 organisations discussed physical health factors. This category, in particular, captured the risk of contracting and spreading Covid-19.</p>

Survey participants were asked what they would like people in power (e.g. local government, national government, NGOs or others) to know or to do to address past or future issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Example responses made by survey participants in relation to this issue include:

"Clearer communication & consistency on the rules as it's been very confusing"

"Need more open hours for GPs"



Access to support services

Overview of survey findings	When asked what they <i>expect</i> the main impacts of Covid-19 to be over the next 6 months (January - June 2021), and provided with a list of 14 categories of impact (of which they could select up to 5 options), 39% of UK survivors selected 'access to support services' as an area that Covid-19 was likely to impact. Access to support services was the fourth most frequently selected category out of the 14 categories of impact.
Supporting evidence from rapid evidence review	When discussing access to support services, sources in the evidence review focused on how moving support services remotely had negatively impacted survivors. This included concerns that: <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ The shift from in-person support to remote support had negatively impacted the mental health of survivors.▪ A lack of in-person legal support may lead to safeguarding issues.▪ Sharing experiences of exploitation online without in-person support and follow-up support may be too traumatic and thus survivors may not be able to access justice.
Monitoring of Twitter communications	5.22% of 479 tweets across 64 organisations discussed Support Access , including mentions of reductions in NGO funding, putting at risk modern slavery prevention work, and modern slavery support services in general.

Survey participants were asked what they would like people in power (e.g. local government, national government, NGOs or others) to know or to do to address past or future issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Example recommendations made by survey respondents in relation to this issue include:

"Address the huge gap regarding support for people who are vulnerable. Increase support for the homeless to reduce their risk of transmitting and being infected"

"Mental health to remain open at all times and food banks"



Relationships with wider family and friends

<p>Overview of survey findings</p>	<p>When asked in the survey in December 2020 how they had been impacted by Covid-19, and provided with a list of 14 pre-selected categories (of which they could select as many as applied), 66% of UK participants indicated that their relationships with wider family and friends had become either somewhat or significantly worse.</p> <p>When asked what they <i>expect</i> the main impacts of Covid-19 to be over the next 6 months (January - June 2021), and provided with a list of 14 categories of impact (of which they could select up to 5 options), 30% of UK survivors selected 'relationships with wider family and friends' as an area that Covid-19 was likely to impact. This category was the fifth most frequently selected category out of the 14 categories of impact.</p> <p>It is worth highlighting that the options available for participants included 'relationships with <i>immediate</i> family' as well as the above category of <i>wider</i> family and friends, however, a greater percentage of participants selected the latter. Whilst the reasons for this are not entirely known, it appears from at least one of the open-ended responses of this survey (see below) that this category may have been related to migrant workers being unable to return to see family due to their visa restrictions or lack of legal documentation.</p>
<p>Supporting evidence from rapid evidence review</p>	<p>The evidence review sources did not discuss the impact of Covid-19 on relationships with wider family and friends but did mention relationships with <i>immediate</i> family. In relation to this, it tended to focus largely on issues of gender-based violence and included reports that women had been:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Trapped during lockdown with abusive partners. ▪ Subjected to violence, including sexual violence but had felt unable to leave due to uncertainties around access to safe housing or the ability to relocate during lockdown.
<p>Monitoring of Twitter communications</p>	<p>3.07% of 479 tweets across 64 organisations tweets discussed Family/Safe Houses but similar to the evidence review, this category was dominated by themes such as domestic violence, gender-based violence and child abuse.</p>

Survey participants were asked what they would like people in power (e.g. local government, national government, NGOs or others) to know or to do to address past or future issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic. An example response made by a survey participant in relation to this issue was:

"The National government must listen to our voices what we are fighting for our rights as undocumented domestic workers, as a victim of human trafficking in this country like me, how many years I didn't see my son and family back to my origin country ☹️☹️☹️"



Legal documentation & domestic workers' issues

Overview of survey findings	<p>When asked in the survey in December 2020 how they had been impacted by Covid-19, and provided with a list of 14 pre-selected categories (of which they could select as many as applied), 57% of UK participants indicated that their ability to return to their country of origin had become either somewhat or significantly worse. Again, it appears from the open-ended responses of this survey that this category may have been related to migrant workers being unable to return to their country of origin due to their visa restrictions or lack of legal documentation.</p> <p>Discussions about domestic workers' issues were reoccurring in the open-ended responses and included repeated calls for the government to reinstate the pre-2012 overseas domestic worker visa.</p>
Supporting evidence from rapid evidence review	<p>In relation to legal documentation, there were reports in the evidence review that awaiting decisions around legal documentation had been a preoccupation for survivors (as discussed under the 'psychological health' category above). There were also reports that survivors had faced:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longer delays accessing legal support and that challenges that existed pre-pandemic had been exacerbated. • Lack of privacy, lack of childcare, and barriers to communication when meeting remotely with legal representatives and asylum authorities. <p>In the evidence review, sources with a global focus identified domestic workers repeatedly as those who face a higher risk of becoming vulnerable to trafficking due to pandemic. In relation to the issues facing domestic workers living in the UK, the evidence included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A report of a domestic worker being left destitute following Home Office's decision to end support following a negative conclusive grounds decision. ▪ Concerns voiced that domestic workers were unable to self-isolate as they need to work to save money for a visa.
Monitoring of Twitter communications	<p>Domestic workers in the UK were flagged in the dataset as those at risk of exploitation and destitution under the 'General Workers' category that makes up 34.28% of affected populations – See <i>separate briefing on 'Anti-Slavery Strategic Communications During COVID-19'</i> for further details.</p>

Survey participants were asked what they would like people in power (e.g. local government, national government, NGOs or others) to know or to do to address past or future issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Example responses made by survey participants in relation to this issue include:

"Give amnesty to all. Illegal disabled people should be allowed to stay in the country and access free healthcare"

"I know it's more difficult but I hope the government will reinstate the pre 2012 Visa for Domestic Workers"



Additional themes emerging from the rapid evidence review

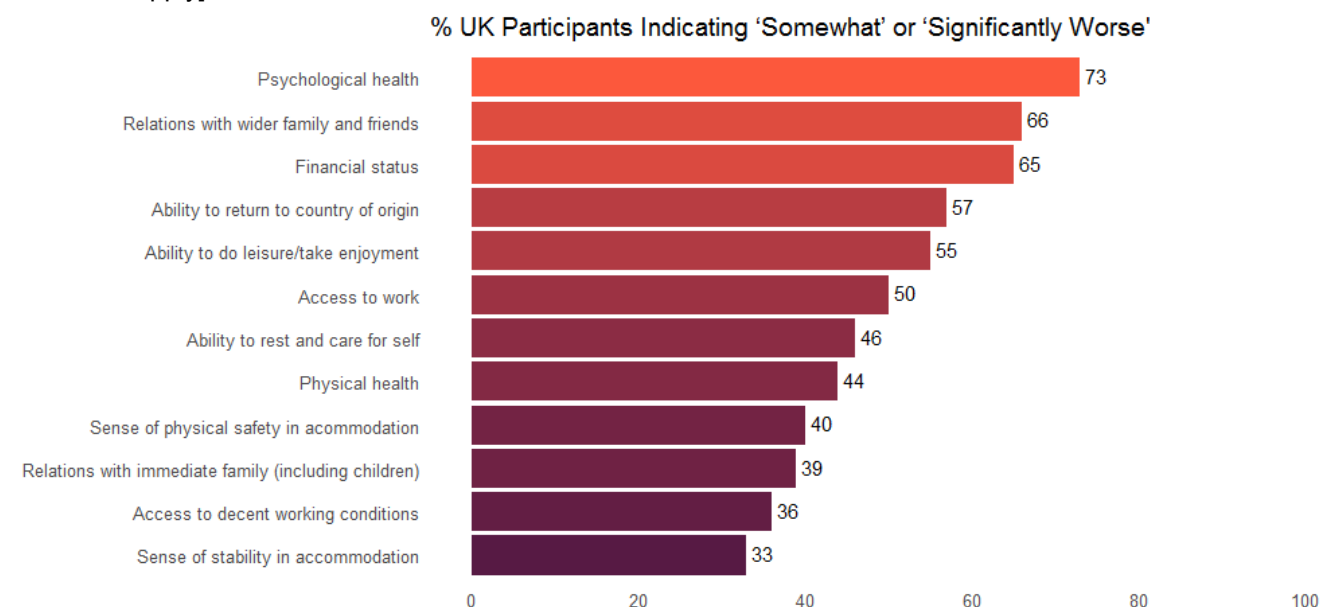
Digital poverty and exclusion	<p>Numerous sources in the evidence review noted that a lack of access to internet (mobile data/Wi-Fi) and technology (digital devices) negatively impacted multiple aspects of survivors' lives. The shift from in-person to remote support compounded the exclusion that some survivors already faced.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Digital poverty and exclusion exacerbated feelings of isolation and loneliness and prevented survivors from participating in community groups.- It inhibited survivors' ability to access forms of support such as free school meal food vouchers for their children, remote education, information about Covid-19, mental health support services, legal assistance, and adequate and safe housing.
Risks to children of online sexual exploitation, trafficking, criminal exploitation and child marriage	<p>Children were identified in a large number of sources as a population who are at a heightened risk of exploitation as a consequence of the pandemic. Sources in the evidence review noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- That the online sexual exploitation of children increased during the initial four months of the pandemic in the UK.- That perpetrators worldwide had adapted their <i>modus operandi</i> shifting to online methods of exploitation targeting children, in particular.- That newly arrived (in the UK) unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who were required to self-isolate in unsupervised accommodation were placed at potential risk of being trafficked. <p>Government sources recognised the risks being faced by children during the pandemic, particularly in relation to online sexual exploitation. Less present in the literature was references to the risks facing children of forced criminal exploitation and child marriage.</p>
Access to information about COVID-19 entitlements	<p>Sources noted that undocumented migrants in the UK may be fearful to avail of testing, treatment and potentially the vaccine due to concerns that they will be reported to immigration authorities by healthcare providers and/or being charged.</p> <p>It was noted that more needs to be done to reassure this population through effective communication strategies around healthcare entitlements (in relation to Covid-19), the safety of the vaccine, and assurances provided that their data will not be shared with immigration authorities.</p>
Fears of increasing discrimination towards migrant workers	<p>An overarching theme across the evidence review was that the pandemic has caused, and will continue to result in, a surge in discrimination towards already marginalised groups, especially migrants. Concerns were raised that migrant workers may be stigmatised as sources of transmission. This may be further exacerbated by the rise in nationalist politics in the UK (as elsewhere such as US and Europe) and Brexit.</p>



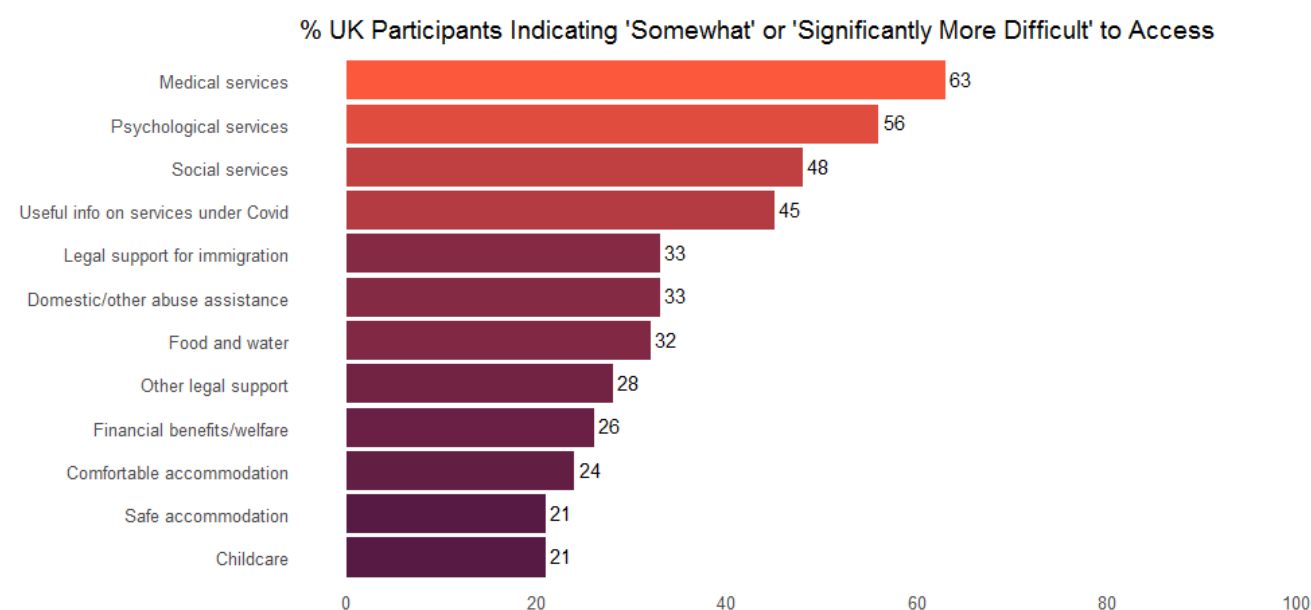
Annex A: Selected Survey Results

The graphs and tables below visually depict the responses received from UK participants to four of the survey questions.

Q4a. Since the pandemic started, please indicate how Covid-19 has impacted you in the following categories [Scale: significantly better/somewhat better/no change/somewhat worse/significantly worse/don't know or doesn't apply]:



Q4b. Since the pandemic started, please indicate how Covid-19 has impacted your access to basic amenities and services [Scale: significantly better/somewhat better/no change/somewhat worse/significantly worse/don't know or doesn't apply]:





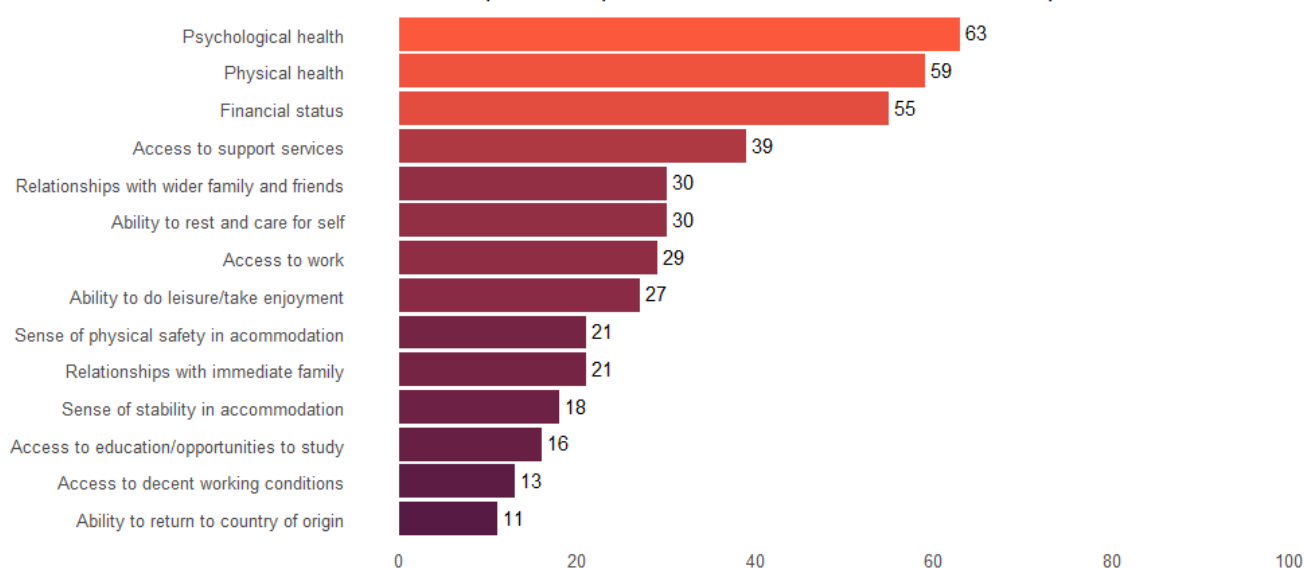
Q4d. Since the pandemic started, have you personally been contacted/ have any adults that you know personally been contacted/ have any children that you know personally (meaning any children you know by name that is under the age of 18) with an offer any of the following opportunities (please select all that apply) [Scale: yes, online/yes, offline/no/ decline to answer]:

"Has There Been Contact with Potential Risk?"
% people in the UK who answered 'Yes'

		You Personally	Adults You Know	Children You Know
Online	About work without proper job description	4% (2)	4% (2)	4% (2)
	About work without skills required	2% (1)	2% (1)	2% (1)
	To engage in illegal activities	4% (2)	7% (4)	0% (0)
	To deliver services in the sex industry	4% (2)	4% (2)	2% (1)
Offline	About work without proper job description	7% (4)	9% (5)	6% (3)
	About work without skills required	7% (4)	15% (8)	4% (2)
	To engage in illegal activities	4% (2)	9% (5)	6% (3)
	To deliver services in the sex industry	4% (2)	9% (5)	4% (2)

Q5. Now thinking about the future, what do you expect the main impacts of Covid-19 to be on you over the next 6 months? Please select up to 5 options:

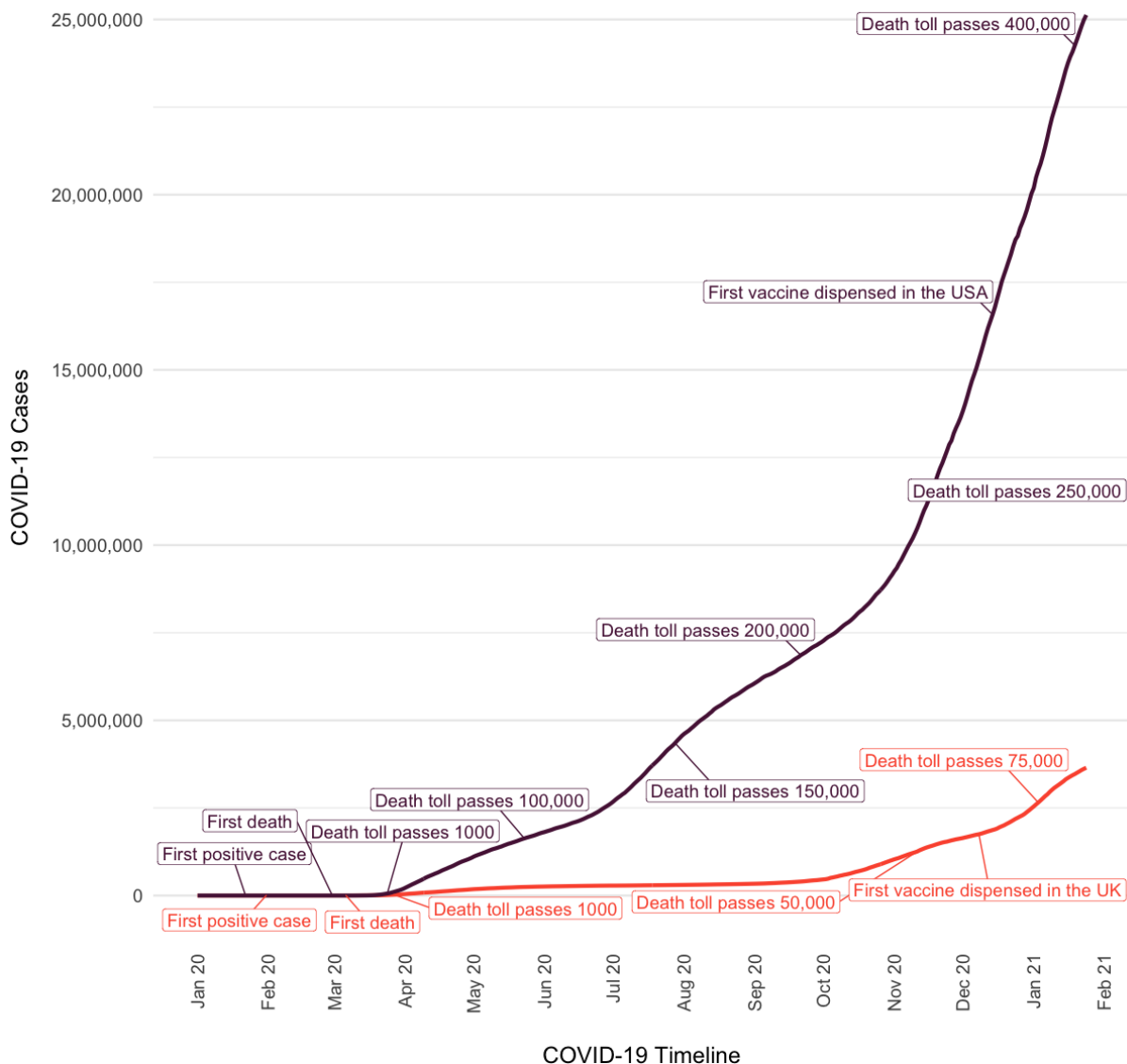
UK Main Expected Impacts Over the Next 6 Months: % Participants





Annex B: Chart Depicting Key Pandemic Events in the UK and US

Summary of Key Pandemic Events



United Kingdom
United States

The partners working with the Rights Lab on this project include the University of Sheffield, the Survivor Alliance, the International Anti-Human Trafficking Network (IAHTN), the Human Trafficking Foundation (HTF), Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX) and Anti-Slavery International / the Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group (ATMG). The research team is grateful to the UKRI for funding this project. For further information about the project, please contact Vicky Brotherton at vicky.brotherton@nottingham.ac.uk

Further written materials stemming from this research will be published in due course here:
<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/research-projects/covid-19-risk-and-response-impacts-and-mitigations-for-modern-slavery-victims-and-survivors.aspx>