



The lockdown is not new. It's worse.
How Covid-19 is affecting Survivor Alliance UK Members
By Nancy Esiovwa and Maria Lozano // May 2020

COVID-19 and the UK-wide lockdown order by the government is obviously a new situation facing all of us. For survivors of modern slavery in the UK, the lockdown is unfortunately not a new experience.

At the basic level the lockdown means staying at home and not going to work or losing a job, not seeing family and friends, being limited in the activities, balancing child care and other responsibilities, and trying to adhere to governmental guidelines for social distancing. Aside from social distancing, these are restrictions that survivors of modern slavery in the UK face every day.

The lockdown experience is not new to survivors - but they are worse.

This document emerges from an invitation to participate in an online forum with other frontline organizations to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on survivors of modern slavery. The information presented comes from Survivor Alliance members who reside in the UK. During the lockdown, Survivor Alliance transitioned some of its leadership programs to online delivery. At the request of our members, Survivor Alliance expanded our online offerings, now hosting online "social calls" to help survivors to remain connected.

Many of the survivors who we have spoken to have indicated that this is not new for them, they were already in lockdown as an asylum seeker. Without regularized immigration status, many survivors were living under similar restrictions for months, and some cases, years, before the lockdown.

Here are the key ways that survivors of modern slavery in the asylum system were already experiencing lockdown.

1. The need to stay at home.

- ❑ **Financial constraints and precarity.** The government allocates subsistence for people who are in 'section 4' (asylum seekers). The allocation is about £37. Living on £5/day provides no one with the ability to feed on and leave their accommodation to do much because there is not enough money to afford travel expenses, food, clothing, mobile service, internet, and so on.
- ❑ Often, survivors are also not sure if they will lose their housing immediately after getting reply from the HO been it good or bad news due to demand on the



asylum system, and or as a result of impending immigration decisions.

❑ **Travel restrictions.** Survivors without immigration status have no documents to travel. As a result, their lives are already limited to a small area. Even if the airport was up and running, they do not have permission to fly anywhere. As mentioned, survivors also do not have enough money to use other means of transportation - to own a car, take a taxi or even the bus.

❑ **Challenges to food access and storage.**

Asylum seekers receive a card with their weekly allowance of £37. Not every food shop accepts payments from this type of card, especially shops that sell culturally appropriate food for survivors from BAME groups. Since survivors don't have enough money to shop in bulk, they must visit shops more frequently and miss out on discounts and offers. Also, the condition of furniture and appliances within safe house accommodation is notoriously poor. It is rarely possible to safely store food for long periods of time.

2. Loss of work or education.

❑ **Right to work.** Most survivors of modern slavery have no right to work, as this is tied to legal status. As a result, survivors' financial freedom is on lockdown. For survivors that have the right to work, job prospects are low or their lack of prior work experience within the country, lack of referees, or the inability to upskill are creating high barriers. Often, survivors who are also asylum seekers are limited to apply for jobs that are on the shortage occupation list, and they don't have these skills. The shortage occupation lists do not include 'seasonal jobs' that is a current need in the UK. It is widespread in the media that the UK needs workers for seasonal jobs. For example picking fruits. We have survivors sitting in their homes who are willing to work and need job.

❑ **Education.** Access to education is tied to immigration status. Asylum seekers are only entitled to a certain level of education at local colleges, or higher levels are too expensive on a £37/week subsistence fund. For survivors waiting for a Leave to Remain status, they are stuck with learning Basic Maths and English.

3. Limitations on activities.

❑ **Volunteering.** Many charity organizations have restrictions on volunteering. DBS checks and other documentation that is inaccessible to survivors can be required. Again the right of choice to collaborate and the involvement in the community by



volunteering jobs is on lockdown.

❑ **Lack of internet and technology.**

Most safe houses have no Internet. As survivors have very little budget, buying mobile data and staying connected by getting credit on their phone is difficult. Survivors also do not have the money to buy laptops or tablets. If they do have them, the government uses this as evidence that survivors are *not* destitute.

❑ **Accommodation restraints.** Safe house accommodation impose restrictions on the freedom of where survivors live, and how far they are from parks, food banks, supermarkets, and social supports. In some extreme cases, survivors must report their whereabouts to a house manager.

❑ Survivors are placed in shared accommodation for years day, in and day out.

How the lockdown has made these restrictions worse.

❖ **Social distancing is nearly impossible.**

Living in a shared house makes it difficult to practise social distancing. Survivors cannot control what their housemates are doing. Also, since survivors must shop more frequently, they are more exposed to the virus.

❖ **Food is more expensive.**

❖ **There is no access to face to face contact with caseworkers.**

The regular contact with case workers give survivors a sense of stability and security. Caseworkers provide resources, advice, information and sometimes companionship. Now, these relationships have been reduced to phone calls that do not provide the same relief for their difficulties.

❖ **People on 'zero' hours contracts have no income at the moment.**

Survivors who have the right to work have usually access to basic work conditions like the 'zero hours contract'. In this lockdown context, most businesses are not open as usual, so survivors' income have been reduced dramatically in most cases.

❖ **There are no support groups and colleges are closed.**

The isolation conditions that survivors live in are usually relieved by their participation among different support community groups or going to college. These groups are not



gathering anymore, so survivors become more vulnerable to a situation of anxiety and depression.

❖ **We can't access the few activities we were accessing.**

Without access to the internet, survivors cannot participate in free resources that are going online. They require additional financial support to top-up their mobile data. Libraries with free computers and wifi are closed and free activities planned by charities Local Authorities are cancelled.

❖ **Isolation and trauma symptoms have increased.**

As a survivors of slavery and human trafficking, our members already experienced a lockdown whilst being exploited. Where some survivors were not allowed to leave for any reason, others were allowed a small range of movement. Being in lockdown is extra triggering. Everyone was working for no pay and being dehumanized. Everyone was not sure what the future could hold.

The other ways isolations and trauma symptoms have increased during lockdown is that survivors don't know what the HO is up to at this point. Survivors don't know if the HO is making decision on people's cases or what is happening to their case during this lockdown. This constant uncertainty does not help the journey of healing and recovery with severe consequences to survivors' well-being.

In overall the lockdown has just given everyone a little idea or peek of what survivors have to go through in their everyday lives. The lockdown has just aggravated survivors' life conditions, postponing even more the possibility to thrive in life and follow their dreams.

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