



Risks & Impacts of Covid-19 for Human Trafficking Survivors in the USA

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 human trafficking.

To date, the research has involved:

- 1. Surveying 102 survivors in the UK and USA between December 2020 to January 2021** to understand the impact of Covid-19 up until that point, expected future impacts, and their suggestions/requests for how these impacts can be mitigated. This briefing will focus on the survey responses from US 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-trafficking 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 US anti-trafficking sector to understand whether these identified risks and impacts reflect the experiences of the wider sector, whether these issues persist as the USA transitions out of the pandemic, and, if so, what action can be taken to address them.

Key areas of risk & impact

Between December 2020 to January 2021, 102 individuals who identify as survivors of human trafficking responded to a survey disseminated by [Survivor Alliance](#) focusing on the impact of Covid-19. **46 of these survey respondents resided in the USA** (56 resided in the UK). 45/46 of the USA participants listed their country of origin as being the USA, and one participant listed their country of origin as being St Kitts and Nevis. 96% of USA respondents identified as female and 4% non-binary. The **age of US respondents** ranged from 28 to 60 years, with the average age being 41 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. Whilst this research captured a range of perspectives across the three strands of the project, it will not have captured everything available due to expansiveness of the USA jurisdiction and anti-trafficking sector.

Psychological health	Access to work
Financial status	Survivors who have left situations of trafficking at risk of being re-exploited
Physical health – In particular, concerns around Covid-19	Intersection between racism, poverty, Covid-19 and human trafficking
Access to support services	Risks to children of online sexual exploitation and trafficking
Ability to do leisure/take enjoyment	Risks to migrant workers



Financial status

<p>Overview of survey findings</p>	<p>When asked in the survey 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), 76% of US participants indicated that their financial status had become either somewhat or significantly worse (the highest percentage across all of the impact categories presented as options).</p> <p>When asked what they <i>expect</i> the main impacts of Covid-19 to be over the following 6 months, and provided with a list of 14 categories of impact (of which they could select up to 5 options), 63% of US survivors selected ‘financial status’ as an area that Covid was likely to impact. Financial status was the second most frequently selected category out of the 14 categories of impact.</p>
<p>Supporting evidence from rapid evidence review</p>	<p>In the evidence review, the financial status of survivors was discussed and included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Concerns that school closures would hinder children’s access to meals. ▪ Reports that survivors who had financial stability pre-pandemic were returning to access support due to loss of employment or reduction to work hours. ▪ Reports that funds had been diverted away from anti-trafficking efforts and concerns that demands for basic amenities would not be met.
<p>Monitoring of Twitter communications</p>	<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:

“We need to face the fact that financially we need some kind of package to help people with finances because even though the pandemic has slow[ed] down for many, people are so out of work and don’t have resources. We need to talk about NGOs not having resources or money available to help survivors and housing is a huge issue.”

“Please do more stimulus and get the Job market back quickly. I want to be out of poverty.”



Psychological health

<p>Overview of survey findings</p>	<p>When asked in a survey 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 US participants indicated that their psychological health had become either somewhat or significantly worse (the second highest percentage over all impact categories presented as options).</p> <p>When asked what they <i>expect</i> the main impacts of Covid-19 to be over the following 6 months and provided with a list of 14 categories of impact (of which they could select up to 5 options), 83% of US survivors selected 'psychological health' as an area that Covid was likely to impact. Psychological health was the most frequently selected category out of the 14 categories of impact.</p>
<p>Supporting evidence from rapid evidence review</p>	<p>In the evidence review, concerns were raised in US sources that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Survivors who had left situations of human trafficking would have reduced access to counselling and support groups. ▪ Survivors more generally may face barriers accessing remote psychological support due to digital poverty as a result of housing and financial instability. ▪ Survivors' inability to access public spaces would hinder their ability to build/rebuild supportive and healthy social networks. <p>There were also reports that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stay-at-home orders and social isolation had triggered past traumas and led to depression, anxiety and feelings of unsafety. Others had felt panic due to being unable to pay bills. ▪ Chronic stress had been exacerbated by fears surrounding Covid-19 such as the fear of death and the unpredictability from day-to-day. ▪ Youth and young adult survivors were more fearful about the future.
<p>Monitoring of Twitter communications</p>	<p>Only 1.08% of 479 tweets across 64 anti-trafficking 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:

"Increased mental health services. My flashbacks and trigger state during the shelter order were horrific and there was no support or options whatsoever. I wish I could have those months back because they caused damage to myself and my family that we will be spending years healing from."

"The reality of C[omplex]-PTSD and real health consequences."

"To think about mental and physical health first. Talk about preventative measures for mental health crisis and healthier lifestyles!"



Physical health – In particular, concerns around Covid-19

<p>Overview of survey findings</p>	<p>When asked in the survey 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), 61% of US 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 following 6 months, and provided with a list of 14 categories of impact (of which they could select up to 5 options), 54% of US survivors selected ‘physical health’ as an area that Covid was likely to impact. Physical health was the third most frequently selected category out of the 14 categories of impact.</p>
<p>Supporting evidence from rapid evidence review</p>	<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"> ▪ Interconnected issues such as poverty and racial disparities. ▪ Lack of choice given to sex workers and those in forced labour to practice protective measures (e.g. PPE and social distancing). ▪ Homelessness and/or those living in shared housing/shelters. ▪ Pre-existing health conditions, some of which may be connected to either historic and current exploitation. ▪ Issues accessing healthcare exacerbated by the pandemic due to inability to afford insurance. <p>Concerns were also raised that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Covid-19 had the potential to increase some survivors’ visibility to immigration authorities which made them apprehensive about availing support from public health systems.
<p>Monitoring of Twitter communications</p>	<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:

“We need more free testing sites so people exiting the life can get fast, accurate results for acceptance to programs. Also we need emergency housing for those exiting the life.”

“Better understanding on what to do if you are positive for Covid-19.”



Access to support services

<p>Overview of survey findings</p>	<p>When asked what they <i>expect</i> the main impacts of Covid-19 to be over the next 6 months (January/Feb – July/Aug 2021), and provided with a list of 14 categories of impact (of which they could select up to 5 options), 50% of US survivors selected ‘access to support services’ as an area that Covid was likely to impact. Access to support services was the fourth most frequently selected category out of the 14 categories of impact.</p> <p>Discussions about the preference for in-person support over remote support were reoccurring in the open-ended responses. There were also calls for more funding to be made available for anti-trafficking organisations.</p>
<p>Supporting evidence from rapid evidence review</p>	<p>When discussing access to support services, sources in the evidence review included concerns that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Access to healthcare, social support services, safehouses and childcare had been negatively impacted because of decreased donations/redirected funds away from the anti-trafficking sector. ▪ Delays in the legal system would deter survivors from testifying against their traffickers. <p>Reports that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ New clients had been turned away from accessing legal support despite the rise in demand. ▪ There had been a rise in demand for emergency shelter but that many shelters had limited capacity and that there had been long waiting times for referrals. ▪ Housing/shelters not accessed by survivors due to fears about contracting Covid-19 in shelters.
<p>Monitoring of Twitter communications</p>	<p>5.22% of 479 tweets across 64 organisations discussed Support Access, including mentions of reductions in NGO funding, putting at risk human trafficking prevention work, and human trafficking support services in general.</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 recommendations made by survey respondents in relation to this issue include:

“To help programs (most specifically those programs that are aiding trafficked persons) that are now too overwhelmed by the majority of people needing services. If people can get help, most can get back on their feet and do indeed desire to fulfil their purpose to contribute to society.”

“With everyone being isolated, I wish I could have had more support whether it was from family, friends or service agencies. I have been very lonely, in fear and actually relapsed after 9 years of sobriety and have been in a dv [domestic violence] relationship with no way to get out unless I chose to live on the streets. So it has been very difficult over the past year.”

“Mental health and physical health should not be done over Skype. We need in person visits.”



Ability to do leisure/take enjoyment

<p>Overview of survey findings</p>	<p>When asked in the survey 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), 72% of US participants indicated that their ability to do leisure/take enjoyment had become either somewhat or significantly worse (the third highest percentage over all impact categories presented as options).</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), 48% of US survivors selected 'ability to do leisure/take enjoyment' 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>A high proportion of survey participants indicated impacts on their ability to undertake leisure and enjoyment, however since this was not reflected as a key theme in their open-ended text responses, it was considered that this might have been connected to a sense of lack of personal choice and freedom, which did emerge in survey text responses as a key theme. However, this connection remains speculative.</p>
<p>Supporting evidence from rapid evidence review</p>	<p>The evidence review sources did not discuss the impact of Covid-19 on the ability for survivors to do leisure/take enjoyment but it did contain a source which suggested that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Government measures, such as social distancing, could remind survivors of how their traffickers controlled their interactions in the past and as a result may lead to survivors not wishing to comply with guidance or, on the contrary, feel anxious to follow recommendations. These sentiments may also be reflected in the open-ended responses (see below).
<p>Monitoring of Twitter communications</p>	<p>The web monitoring did not discuss the impact of Covid-19 on ability to do leisure/take enjoyment.</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:

"Ability to make decisions to keep myself safe; the government is putting the restrictions in place and taking away my freedom to decide what I want to do to be safe."

"Allow people the choice to work in office or at home, do not prevent them from working in the office."



Access to work

<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), 64% of US participants indicated that their access to work 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), 22% of US survivors selected 'access to work' as an area that Covid-19 was likely to impact. This category was the tenth most frequently selected category out of the 14 categories of impact. Although participants did not seem to anticipate access to work would be as negatively impacted looking ahead, this may have been captured in the 'financial status' category.</p> <p>Discussions about access to work were reoccurring in the open-ended responses and included repeated calls for the elimination of background checks. The topic of access to childcare during school closures and student loan payments also arose.</p>
<p>Supporting evidence from rapid evidence review</p>	<p>In relation to access to work, there were reports in the evidence review that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Congress's Covid-19 response legislation left survivors behind, including those in agricultural, food processing and packaging, domestic, cleaning sectors on temporary non-immigrant visas. ▪ Domestic workers were at risk of not being paid by employers and if made unemployed would not be eligible for government financial assistance. ▪ Survivors faced challenges securing work because they needed identification document from, for example, the Department of Motor Vehicles, which had been closed due to Covid-19. ▪ Traffickers were coercing those they exploit to generate additional income through extra work or criminal activity.
<p>Monitoring of Twitter communications</p>	<p>Under the 'General Workers' category that makes up 34.28% of affected populations, some economic risks for this population category related to loss of income, destitution, unemployment, and lack of financial support were present. In the US, the dataset featured frequent mentions of the risk of exploitation faced by farmworkers in California – <i>See separate briefing on 'Anti-Slavery Strategic Communications During Covid-19' for further details.</i></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:

"Please please please don't close the schools again. If the kids stay in school, there's a chance I can find work as a substitute teacher. It's a better job, even, than the work-from-home job that I had to quit while helping my kids with online school."

"Eliminate background checks."



Survivors at risk of re-exploitation

<p>Overview of survey findings</p>	<p>When survey participants were asked about risky online contact during Covid-19, 25% said they had been contacted to engage in illegal activity, 38% indicated that they knew other adults who had been, and 9% stated that children they knew had been. 29% of respondents said that they had been contacted regarding delivering services in the sex industry; 38% knew other adults who had been contacted to deliver services in the sex industry and 7% indicated that they knew children who had been contacted (see Annex A).</p> <p>Discussions about survivors being at risk of re-exploitation was a preoccupation in the open-ended responses and was often connected with other factors such as safe-housing, financial status, employment and educational opportunities (see below).</p>
<p>Supporting evidence from rapid evidence review</p>	<p>The risk to survivors who have left situations of trafficking of being re-trafficked was discussed in a range of sources in the evidence review and included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fears that forced evictions would lead to re-trafficking. ▪ Predictions that survivors would be targeted during this time by former traffickers. ▪ Reports that survivors were concerned that due to court closures and disruption to prosecutions their former traffickers may be released from prisons (due to Covid-19 outbreaks) and retaliate against them. ▪ Reports that some survivors had wished to re-use drugs and others to return to commercial exploitation due to pressures of the pandemic. ▪ Fears that survivors in prisons who are released (due to Covid-19 outbreaks) may be left destitute and unable to work and therefore at risk of re-exploitation. ▪ Concerns that survivors may be at greater risk of re-exploitation if approached by new traffickers offering relief from the stress of the pandemic.
<p>Monitoring of Twitter communications</p>	<p>Under the 'Survivors' category that makes up 4.68% of affected populations, the heightened risks of re-trafficking across the globe was highlighted - See separate briefing on 'Anti-Slavery Strategic Communications During Covid-19' 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:

"Safe housing...where we are not under threat of perpetrators finding us."

"Enforce mask mandates, prevent landlords from kicking out tenants, stop student loan payments OR provide citizens with more funds and opportunities to prevent themselves from being forced into a trafficking situation due to desperation."

"This time we need to be at home, gaining a higher education so we can be employed and self-sufficient. No grants or scholarships exist for us to get away from the people that are all we have to ask for help."



Additional themes emerging from the rapid evidence review

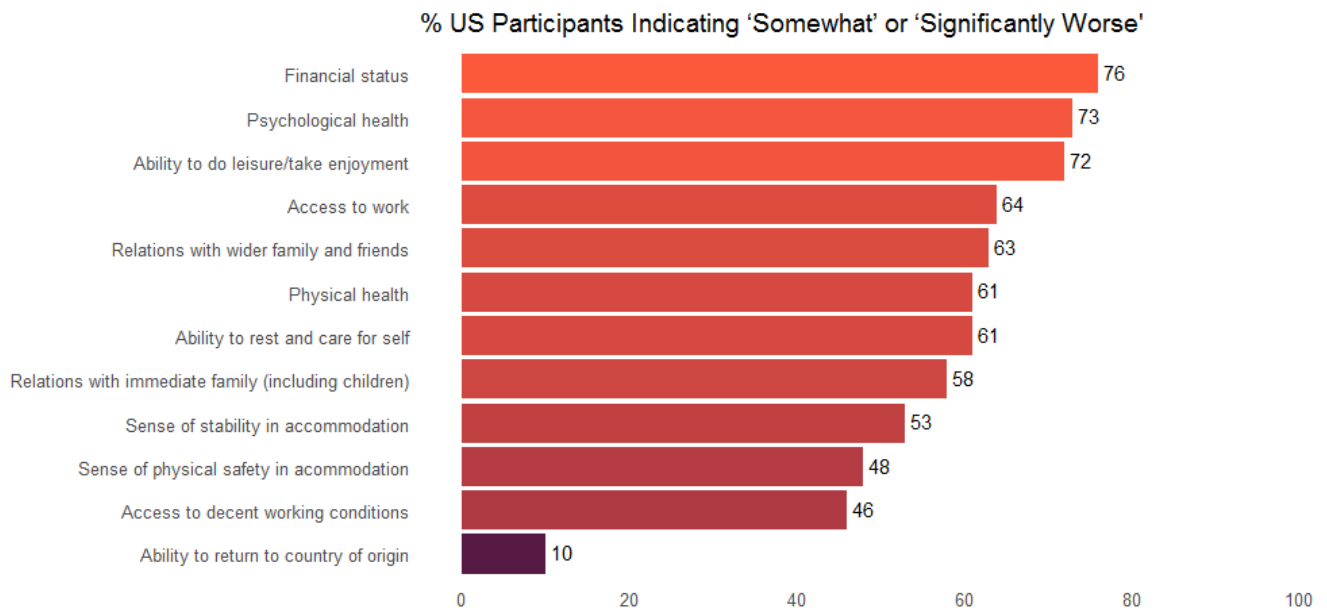
<p>Intersection between racism, poverty, Covid-19 and human trafficking</p>	<p>Sources in the evidence review foregrounded the further risks experienced by people of colour as a result of the pandemic. Sources included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reference to the brutal killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and how this had unveiled ‘another pandemic’. - A report that black survivors had been shaken by this ‘double pandemic’. - Discussions about the interplay between racism, poverty, unequal protection under the law, human trafficking and Covid-19 and how this placed people of colour at risk of both being trafficked and of Covid-19.
<p>Risks to children of online sexual exploitation and trafficking</p>	<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 months of the pandemic in the USA. - That perpetrators worldwide had adapted their <i>modus operandi</i> shifting to online methods of exploitation targeting children, in particular. - That children were at risk of being coerced by relatives to be used in the live-stream child sex abuse trade. - College students (especially those who had relied on jobs in hospitality and retail that had been lost) were also identified as an at risk group when it came to being trafficked during campus closures. <p>Government sources recognised the risks being faced by children during the pandemic, particularly in relation to online sexual exploitation.</p>
<p>Risks to migrant workers</p>	<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 USA (as elsewhere such as the UK and other parts of Europe). Sources also suggested that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workers such as those in agricultural, food processing and packaging, domestic and cleaning sectors on temporary non-immigrant visas such as H2A, H2B, B-1 and J-1 are at risk of becoming trafficked and exploited.



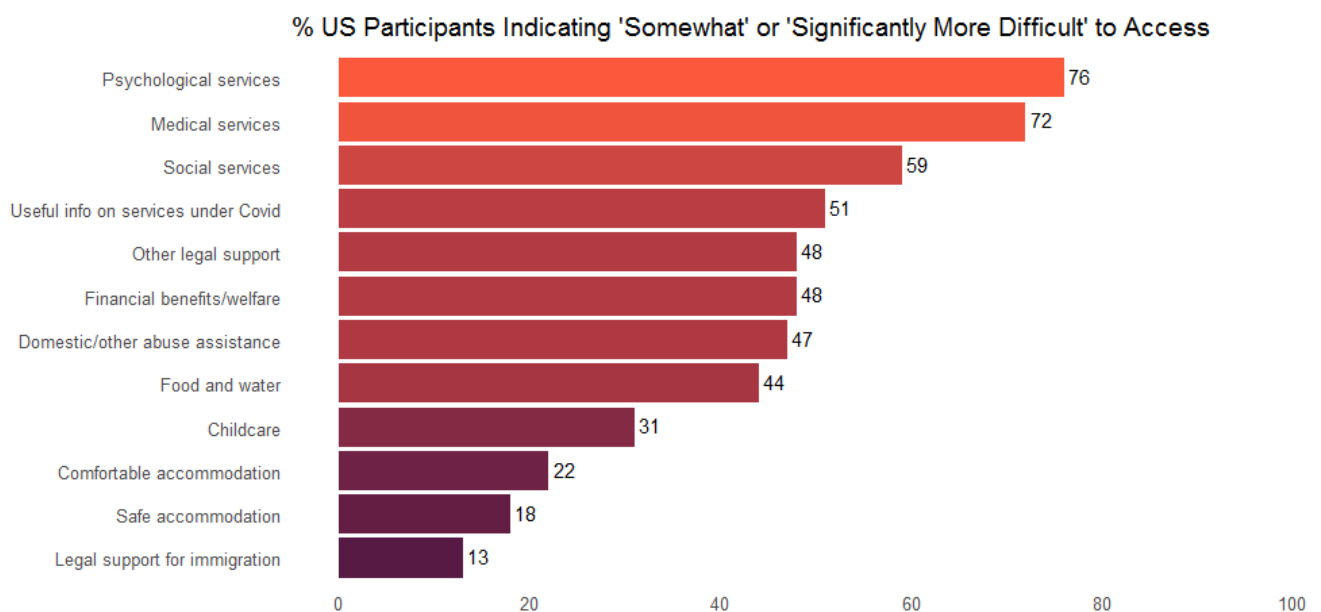
Annex A: Selected Survey Results

The graphs and tables below visually depict the responses received from US 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]:





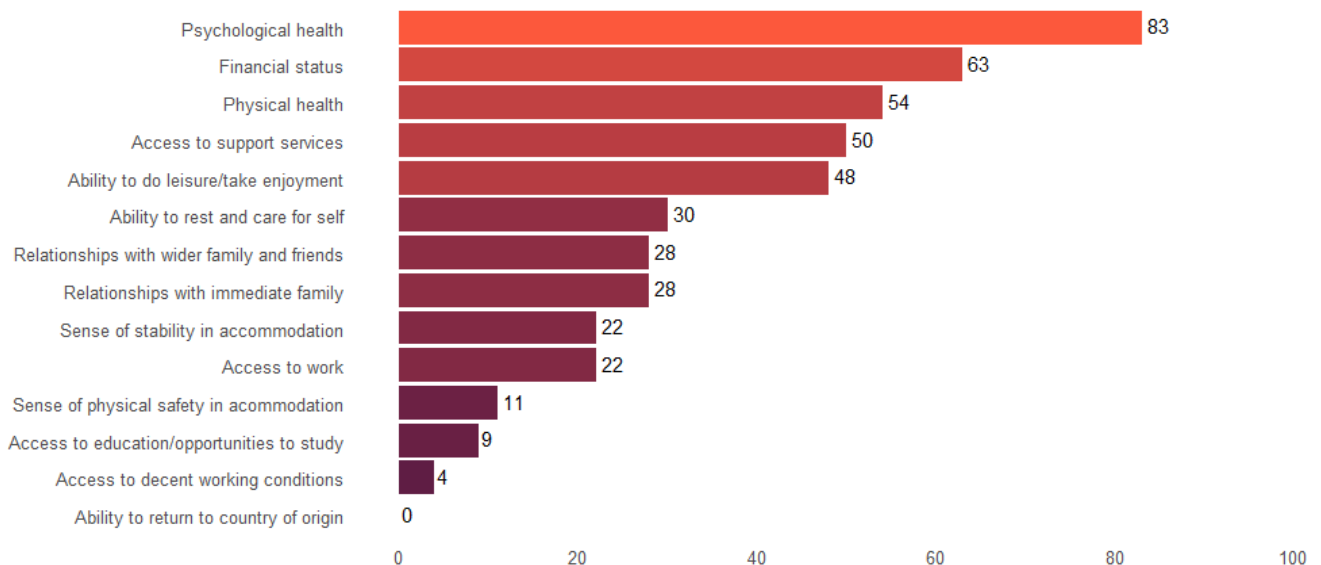
Q4d. Since the pandemic started, have you personally been contacted/ have any adults that you know personally been contacted/ have any children that you know personally (meaning any children you know by name that is under the age of 18) with an offer any of the following opportunities (please select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

“Has There Been Contact with Potential Risk?”
% people in the US who answered ‘Yes’

		You Personally	Adults You Know	Children You Know
Online	About work without proper job description	16% (7)	27% (12)	4% (2)
	About work without skills required	9% (4)	27% (12)	4% (2)
	To engage in illegal activities	25% (11)	38% (17)	9%(4)
	To deliver services in the sex industry	29% (13)	38% (17)	7% (3)
Offline	About work without proper job description	0% (0)	11% (5)	4% (2)
	About work without skills required	4% (2)	7% (3)	0% (0)
	To engage in illegal activities	18% (8)	29% (13)	13% (6)
	To deliver services in the sex industry	11% (5)	36% (16)	13% (6)

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:

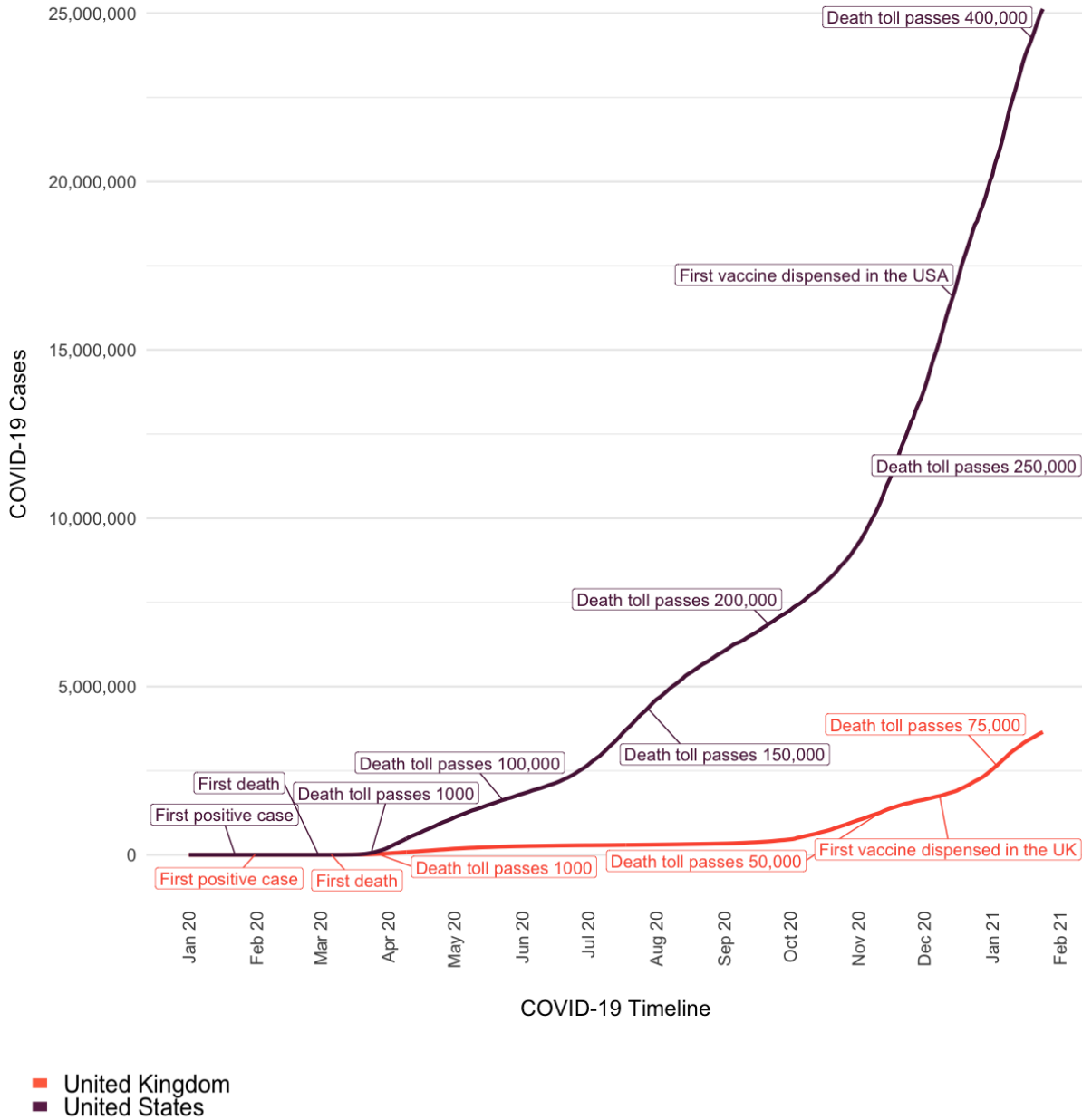
US Main Expected Impacts Over the Next 6 Months: % Participants





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

Summary of Key Pandemic Events



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 Rights Lab research team includes Liana Bravobalsa, Vicky Brotherton, Alison Gardner, Erika Jimenez, Ben Lucas, Zoe Trodd, Nicola Wright and Emily Wyman. The 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>