

# Corruption, human trafficking and UK borders

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## **1. Introduction**

The UK's new government, both like its predecessor and many other governments around the world, is faced with the challenge of controlling its borders. What role, if any, does corruption play as an enabler of illegal immigration and human trafficking into the UK? Corruption research – both theoretical and empirical - suggests that borders are extremely high risk for corruption. But there is a paucity of data and the UK's institutional response has been weak. Given the high political profile of illegal immigration in the UK and elsewhere, it is a conundrum that so little attention has been paid to working out how far corruption is a problem, and how to reduce it.

## **2. What is illegal immigration?**

As a starting point, we can break down the term 'illegal immigration' into component parts, including:

- people smuggling in various forms (such as small boats crossing the Channel and cramming people into refrigerated lorries)
- legitimate travel but with fake documentation (eg arriving on a plane at Heathrow with a fake passport)
- illegally obtaining genuine documentation (eg by a fraudulent application)
- permeable transit arrangements (people notionally passing through a country but actually staying).

New arrivals historically aimed to stay under the radar, but a recent development has been their willingness to give themselves up, entering a lengthy processing system from which they may hope to emerge with the right to stay in the UK. This means their focus is on

getting to the UK at all costs, not on how to survive undetected in the grey economy. It also heightens the subsequent risk of corruption as applicants enter a bureaucratic process populated by officials who have strong discretionary powers.

A grim sub-set of illegal immigration alongside the people smuggling is human trafficking - in which people are traded against their will (by various means include fraud, deception, abduction and coercion) and often moved across borders by organised crime groups (OCG)<sup>1</sup> and then exploited into various forms of modern slavery.

### 3. What role does corruption play in UK borders?

Research from across the world – though not extensive - tells us that corruption is one of the reasons that people are so easily able to cross supposedly secure national borders, or to gain the right papers, or to speed up the processing of an application. Yet this is seldom discussed in the context of UK immigration and the UK's [rising numbers](#) of illegal immigrants and [increase](#) in human trafficking.

Although we do not know with any certainty how much of a problem it is, or how far illegal immigration might be reduced if corruption were tackled effectively, three recent stories shine a spotlight on why corruption in relation to UK borders needs to be better understood.

- An asylum seeker was told by an immigration official that for a [bribe of £2,000](#) he could secure the relevant paperwork and approvals for UK residency. We might assume this was not the first time the official had tried such a thing - just the first time he encountered a whistleblower.
- A [border officer at Gatwick airport](#) passed sensitive information about anti-smuggling operations to an OCG. This particularly highlights the role of OCGs in lucrative cross-border trade (in people and goods).
- A [border officer in Portsmouth](#) assisted a London-based OCG to pass through his booth at Portsmouth with 15 kilos of Class A drugs, showing how easily penetrable borders can be with the right inducements.

All three cases involved public officials acting corruptly, with OCGs being involved in two of the three. For OCGs, corruption is simply a means to an end, with a calculable risk-reward ratio. In most cases, we can assume the calculation is that the risk of getting caught is fairly low.

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<sup>1</sup> Also referred to elsewhere as Serious Organised Crime (SOC) Groups

By coincidence, as these three stories of border officials' proven corruption entered the news, The Guardian [published results](#) from a Freedom of Information request which revealed some data about the official response to the threat posed by corruption.

The Guardian article tells us that the Border and Immigration service's Anti-Corruption Criminal Investigation Unit (ACCIU) had a reported '95 allegations investigated over the past three years, along with the 34 cases currently under investigation and the two convictions' of which '59 cases found insufficient evidence to progress to a criminal case.' That is an average of around 30 new cases per year, of which the majority went nowhere.

A separate report from September 2023 by David Neal, the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration [revealed](#) that the parallel Joint Anti-Corruption Intelligence Team (JACIT) had in the calendar year 2022 'received 127 referrals over the period, and of those 90 had been closed' (para 9.17, p.42) - noting that '49% of JACIT cases relate to local management issues such as poor training, attendance, and time management rather than corruption' (para 9.20, p.43). This suggests JACIT dealt with around 65 corruption cases in a 12-month period, but with no detail about whether the closed cases had resulted in any disciplinary action or prosecution.

As an approximate estimate (based on these figures, and with the obvious caveats about how to interpret the data) the UK's two borders-related anti-corruption teams seem to have investigated around 100 cases over twelve months.

Does this tell us there is a lot of corruption - or not much? By comparison, the Metropolitan Police has around 45,000 staff compared to the 23,000 at the Home Office's three border agencies - the Border Force, UK Visas and Immigration, and Immigration Enforcement. An anti-corruption hotline operating at the Met for 16 months received [3,000 allegations](#).

So, 95 allegations going into the ACCIU over three years looks very small by contrast with the Met, as does a combined estimate of 100 from both units over twelve months. That could be because there is less corruption, or perhaps people do not trust the confidentiality of the reporting mechanisms, or it could mean that we are considerably less good at being aware of corruption among our border officials than we are for the police. In reality, these numbers are worryingly low, suggesting that the systems in place are not really picking up what is going on.

What we see overall is a nexus of corruption vulnerability, organised crime, and incentives for both the supply-side (paying bribes) and the demand-side (demanding bribes) of corruption. In any sector, this would be considered as exceptionally high risk. There is no reason to believe that the cases which have come to light regarding UK borders and immigration are exceptions or one-off rotten apples. Indeed, it seems improbable that

levels of corruption amongst border and immigration officials are not higher than the bare bones statistics suggest. If you are already willing and able to [pay](#) £4,000 for a place on a small boat crossing the Channel, why would you not pay a bit more to bribe a border or immigration official - or pay an all-in fee to the traffickers who can bribe or intimidate the officials on your behalf?

Such an approach was [described](#) as an optional 'sub-service' offered by OCGs in a 2009 Home Office review entitled 'Organised Immigration Crime: a post-conviction study' which interviewed those convicted of smuggling and trafficking, and concluded 'Corruption and bribery were mentioned by a range of interviewees involved in both smuggling and trafficking as a means of smoothing the passage into the UK. This might occur within the originating countries, transit countries or in the UK' (p.19).

#### 4. The literature on border-related corruption

While the responsibility for UK borders sits squarely with the UK government, it is not alone in finding it hard to get to grips with border-related corruption. Surprisingly little is known about border-related corruption around the world – the state of play to 2018 was [summarised](#) in a paper from the U4 anti-corruption Helpdesk which noted that 'interest in border related corruption is largely limited in the literature to the issue of corruption in customs. It is mainly the economists who focus on this issue and try to clarify the relationships between tariffs and corruption' (p.2).

Sequeira, Djankov, et. al (2014) studied corruption in ports and borders - mainly focusing on Africa, noting the empirical challenge due to 'the absence of data on bribe payments' (p.277). The situation had improved little by 2019 when Jancsics concluded that 'Despite the growing importance of border-related corrupt activities, the concept of border corruption is still underdeveloped. While many studies have discussed other forms of corruption, the empirical and theoretical academic literature on border corruption is surprisingly limited...' (Jancsics 2019, p. 406). Jancsics wrote further that 'In many countries, customs and border protection agencies are perceived as the most corrupt government institutions. Officers in those organizations have more opportunities to participate in corruption than do employees in other law enforcement agencies. Moreover, border-related corrupt activities may be directly linked to organized crime groups.' (Jancsics 2019, p.406; see also Jancsics 2021).

For corruption theorists, corruption amongst border control officials demonstrates a classic rational choice approach to corruption amongst public officials, as illustrated by the Klitgaard formula (Corruption = monopoly + discretion - accountability), since officials have

the opportunity for personal gain while exercising extensive personal discretion with little oversight (Klitgaard 1988).<sup>2</sup>

Alongside the international trends and context sit some specifically British circumstances. For example, an [analysis](#) by think-tank RUSI reported 'The range of personnel targeted speaks to the diversity of public and private sector actors with access to port information and infrastructure. Of relevance here are the changes witnessed over two decades in the form of deregulation and privatisation.'

We must also remember that this is not just about asylum seekers desperate to establish a new life. Corruption across borders also has a direct link with human trafficking – that is people who are being abused and exploited, often as modern slaves, and not simply smuggled. Rusev (2013, p.13) reported that 'Researchers and experts agree that trafficking in humans cannot take place without corruption.' This was [reinforced](#) by a UNDP Report in 2021 which concluded 'Across all stages of contemporary forms of slavery, cross-border trafficking is most prone to corruption' (p.9) and that 'Trafficking networks tend to build layers of protection within the institutions they are more likely to need' (p.10). This suggests that within the UK, we should almost certainly be joining up efforts to tackle modern slavery with efforts to tackle corruption. The case for viewing these problems hand-in-hand is made by Ramasastry (2013) and Harris and Nolan (2020).

Broad and Lord (2018, p.63) found 'Evidence suggests that many routes through which victims are transported into the UK involve the use of bribery and corruption to facilitate border crossing.' That takes us beyond the question of corruption within the UK, to the question of how corruption elsewhere undermines the security of the UK's own borders: there are many borders to be crossed prior to reaching the shores of the Channel. If you wonder how so many immigrants are able to get as far as the Channel in the first place, or how they are able to set off in the small boats, you should be thinking about the role that corruption could be playing.

## 5. The UK's response to date

Over the past decade, as it has become increasingly clear that borders everywhere are particularly vulnerable to corruption, this risk has become acknowledged by the relevant UK authorities. For example, the UK's National Strategic [Assessment](#) of Serious Organised Crime (2019) published by the National Crime Agency states: 'Offenders continue to use corrupt public and private sector workers to facilitate their activities. Border, immigration, law enforcement and prison staff work in areas that are particularly vulnerable. Corruption

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<sup>2</sup> The authors of course acknowledge the limitations of the Klitgaard formula, while also noting that it can be particularly apt in cases where its key elements are so obviously present.

at borders has been uncovered on a number of occasions over the past year...' (para 20, p.9).

This risk of corruption is dynamic, as the context changes: the 2023 Assessment [noted](#) 'In 2022, the demand for additional staff at travel hubs, particularly airports, was widely reported. It is likely that organised crime groups saw this as an opportunity to have complicit associates apply for roles in the industry. The risk may be compounded by the cost of living increase, making financially impacted staff more susceptible to approaches from organised crime groups' (p.9).

Borders were also one of the four areas of domestic corruption covered by the UK's first national [Anti-Corruption Strategy](#) in 2017 (although this expired in 2022 and has not yet been replaced). This talks about aiming for 'reduced vulnerability to corrupt insiders' (p.8) and a progress check-in [published](#) in 2020 listed a number of information-sharing and coordination aspirations related to borders and immigration that were 'on track or completed.' But the low figures for reporting and investigating from the ACCIU quoted above suggest that tightening up on some of the vulnerabilities has a very long way to go.

In fact, the vulnerabilities may be getting worse. David Neal - the independent inspector - [reported in 2023](#) that 'the most recent Border Force People Survey signposts a dissatisfied workforce which is a breeding ground for insider risk to grow and become insider acts, enabled by privileged access' (p.2).

The good news is that in the various government and law enforcement strategies mentioned above, there does seem to be a recognition that the UK may have a lurking corruption problem within its various border and immigration agencies, contributing to the broader problem of illegal immigration. The less positive news is there is little evidence that appropriate action has been followed to understand and address the problem more fully. In data terms, we clearly know little about the scale, prevalence and type of corruption in relation to UK borders, despite this being a high-risk area for corruption. And since this is a field that is at the heart of the political debate, it is worrying that policy may be made, and resources directed, in an evidential vacuum.

One of the key things we do not know is whether a more effective anti-corruption approach would reduce the amount of illegal immigration or human trafficking into the UK. But what we do know from myriad examples around the world is that if corruption is allowed to take root in an institution or sector, it is difficult and expensive to stamp out - while fundamentally undermining the ability of key public institutions to carry out their roles.



## 6. What could the UK government be doing better?

What could be done? Despite the ongoing efforts of the Home Office's Joint Anti-Corruption Unit (JACU) to coordinate across government, the political will to tackle corruption has sharply declined in recent years. There is a wider challenge of addressing the UK's messy [anti-corruption governance](#) so that the UK gains an overall sense of direction and it is clear who is in charge of the government's strategy on tackling corruption. One of the consequences of this scattergun approach is that the lens of corruption analysis is not consistently applied to circumstances where it might seem most appropriate to do so. For instance, in the notorious case of disappearances from hotels of [young people seeking asylum](#), was bribery an issue – and did anyone ask that question? At present, the areas corruption experts might most obviously look at are apparently ignored.

But meanwhile, setting aside that wider picture of the UK's overall approach to tackling corruption, here are a few suggestions related to borders:

- ***Incentivise confidential reporting.*** If you are an illegal immigrant or asylum seeker who comes across corruption, why would you report it - and who to? Perhaps there could be an incentive to do so. Spare a thought for the individual who reported the official asking him for a £2,000 bribe. He could have secured his immigration status, but instead did the right thing. Why not reward him with those very same papers for which he refused to pay a bribe?
- ***Pay and morale.*** Reduce the incentives for border and immigration staff to earn some money on the side, reflecting the independent inspector's concern that low pay and morale are a 'breeding ground' for corruption.
- ***Establish a typology*** of corruption for UK borders and immigration. What do the known cases in the UK and elsewhere tell us? Having such a typology would enable the UK to design more specific responses. Although there is scant work on border-related corruption, the UK could learn better from what does exist (some of which is helpfully [collected](#) in the paper cited above by the U4 helpdesk).
- ***Transparency.*** More transparency or access to data from the ACCIU and JACIT teams, as well as the National Crime Agency, would enable others (academics, think tanks) to assist in building a picture of the threat and help develop evidence-based policy solutions.
- ***Join things up.*** Why have separate but overlapping agencies dealing with the same problem? How do they coordinate with other relevant areas such as the [Modern Slavery strategy](#) (which has no substantive references to bribery or corruption). The current institutional arrangements and coordination are not proportionate to the risk.

Ultimately, if we are to design appropriate responses, we need to know much more about what the problem is. Perhaps the information vacuum reflects the complacency about

corruption that is present in so many British institutions: while we are quick to note the imperfections of other countries, we are reluctant to recognise that there may be a corruption problem at the heart of some of our own institutions – corruptible officials in institutions that have been targeted by OCGs and weakened by poor understanding and coordination. But if the UK is really seeking to tackle corruption around borders, there needs to be a fundamental acceptance that corruption can and does happen within our own institutions - and possibly on a much larger scale than the existing data suggest.

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