

United Kingdom 2024 Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

The human rights situation worsened in the United Kingdom during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of serious restrictions on freedom of expression, including enforcement of or threat of criminal or civil laws in order to limit expression; and crimes, violence, or threats of violence motivated by antisemitism.

The government sometimes took credible steps to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses, but prosecution and punishment for such abuses was inconsistent.

Section 1. Life

a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were no reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Coercion in Population Control

There were no reports of involuntary sterilization on the part of government

authorities.

Section 2. Liberty

a. Freedom of the Press

The law generally provided for freedom of speech, including for members of the press and other media, and the government generally respected this right, though there were specific areas of concern, including involving restrictions on political speech deemed “hateful” or “offensive” as well as speech within “Public Spaces Protections Orders” areas (allowing local councils to limit speech rights within designated areas) and “Safe Access Zones” (limiting speech rights around abortion clinics). These restrictions on freedom of speech could include prohibitions on efforts to influence others when inside a restricted area, even through prayer or silent protests.

The law prohibited expressions of “hatred” toward persons because of their color, race, nationality (including citizenship), ethnic or national origin, religion, or sexual orientation as well as any communication that was deemed threatening or abusive and was intended to harass, alarm, or distress a person. The penalties for such speech included fines, imprisonment, or both. There were laws in the United Kingdom (UK) that restricted freedom of speech in certain areas or allowed local councils to establish areas with restrictions on freedom of speech.

The law authorized UK authorities, including the Office of Communications (Ofcom), to monitor all forms of communication for speech they deemed “illegal.” The Online Safety Act of 2023, which came into force in 2024, defined the category of “online harm” and expressly expanded Ofcom’s authority to include American media and technology firms with a substantial number of British users, regardless of whether they had a corporate presence in the UK. Under the law, companies were required to engage in proactive “illegal content risk assessment” to mitigate the risk of users encountering speech deemed illegal by Ofcom. Experts warned that one effect of the bill could be government regulation to reduce or eliminate effective encryption (and therefore user privacy) on platforms.

Expansive and unclear restrictions on potentially prejudicial reporting on ongoing court and tribunal proceedings limited the freedom of the press. In one instance, UK contempt of court laws forced U.S. magazine *The New Yorker* to geoblock British subscribers from reading an online article regarding an ongoing court case. The Law Commission (a statutory independent body) undertook a wide-ranging review of contempt of court rules with an eye towards reform.

On April 1, the Scottish government implemented the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act, including the introduction of offenses “stirring up hatred” through threatening or abusive behavior and the communication of threatening or abusive material.

Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups

Legal restrictions on speech labeled as threatening, offensive, or constituting a “hate crime” applied to print and broadcast media including social media.

In the wake of an attack in Southport in which three young girls were stabbed to death, local and national government officials repeatedly intervened to chill speech as to the identity and motives of the attacker (later identified as Axel Rudakubana, a British citizen of Rwandan origins). The government called on companies, including U.S. firms, to censor speech deemed misinformation or “hate speech.” Director of Public Prosecutions Stephen Parkinson threatened to prosecute and seek the extradition of those who “repost, repeat, or amplify a message which is false, threatening, or stirs up racial/religious hatred.” The Crown Prosecution Service shared a video online stating that citizens should “Think before you post!” and threatening legal consequences for violations of the law. After the attack, numerous individuals were arrested for online speech about the attack and its motivations, though in some cases charges were later dropped. Numerous nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and media outlets criticized the government’s approach to censoring speech, both in principle and in the perceived weaponization of law enforcement against political views disfavored by authorities.

While many media observers deemed “two-tier” enforcement of these laws following the Southport attacks an especially grievous example of government censorship, censorship of ordinary Britons was increasingly routine, often targeted at political speech.

In July, a man was jailed and handed an eight-week sentence for posting a meme suggesting a link between migrants and knife crime. In October, an individual was convicted in England for engaging in silent prayer in violation of a “safe zone.”

In the British Virgin Islands, the law criminalized “sending offensive messages through a computer” with imprisonment for up to 14 years and a fine if convicted. The law applied to messages that were deemed “grossly offensive” or had “menacing character” or that were sent “for the purpose of causing annoyance or inconvenience.” Media freedom NGOs strongly criticized the law.

b. Worker Rights

Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The law provided for the right of workers to form and join independent trade unions, bargain collectively, and conduct legal strikes. The law did not cover workers in the armed forces, public-sector security services, police forces, and freelance or temporary work.

The law prohibited antiunion discrimination and protected employees from unfair dismissal while striking for up to 12 weeks, provided the union complied with the legal requirements governing such industrial action. Under the law employers were not allowed to dismiss an employee for being or wanting to be a trade union member.

The law required a supportive ballot before industrial action by a trade union. A ballot was regarded as supportive if at least 50 percent of those who were entitled to vote did so, and if the majority of those votes were in favor of industrial action. For workers in “important public services,” defined as health services, education for those younger than 17, fire services, transport services, nuclear decommissioning and the management of radioactive waste and spent fuel, and border security, a ballot was deemed supportive only if at least 40 percent of eligible voters voted in favor of industrial action. After securing a supportive ballot, the trade union was required to provide the employer with 14-days’ notice before strike action was taken. The members’ agreement to a union’s proposed industrial action automatically expired six months after the date of the ballot. If nonunion members conducted a strike, they were protected from dismissal and had the same rights as union members, if the industrial action were lawful.

Industrial action, including strike action organized by a trade union, was legal provided conditions were met.

The government effectively enforced laws protecting freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right of workers to engage in a strike or other industrial action. Employers generally respected freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. Most trade union rights applied only to recognized, independent trade unions. A trade union could be certified as independent if it was not employer linked. The trade union was recognized by the employer if there was a recognition agreement between trade union and employer for collective bargaining purposes. Workers were entitled to have a trade union recognized where most of the workers concerned supported the union, as evidenced by a ballot showing a majority of workers voted, and at least 40 percent of those eligible to vote supported recognition. There was a statutory procedure for trade union recognition (and derecognition) applicable to companies with more than 21 workers. A statutory recognition agreement limited negotiations to pay (not including pensions), hours of work, and holidays. Workers on strike could expect to lose wages for the time they did not work. No one could be forced to take part in a strike.

Penalties for violations of freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike were commensurate with those for analogous legal violations of civil rights and were regularly applied against violators.

Inspection was sufficient to enforce compliance. Remedies were limited in situations where workers faced reprisal for trade union activity. Workers could make a claim to an independent employment tribunal in instances of

unfair dismissal, discrimination at work, breach of contract, or unauthorized pay deductions. Workers claiming unfair dismissal for trade union activities, acting as a workers' representative, and whistleblowing were able to continue paid employment (known as interim relief) until the case was decided by the employment tribunal.

The Advisory, Conciliation, and Arbitration Service, primarily funded by the Department for Business and Trade, worked to help employees and employers better adhere to collective bargaining and other workplace laws and to improve workplace relationships. It provided free advice to employers, employees, and their representatives, as well as dispute resolution services. If the Advisory, Conciliation, and Arbitration Service was not able to settle a dispute, a claim could be made at an employment tribunal and, in some cases, be eligible for interim relief.

Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acceptable Work Conditions

Wage and Hour Laws

The law provided for the National Living Wage for workers ages 23 and older and for workers ages 16 to age 22. Wages were above the official estimate

for the poverty income level.

The law limited the workweek to an average of 48 hours, normally calculated based on a 17-week period. The law did not prohibit compulsory overtime, but it limited overtime to the 48-hour workweek restriction. The 48-hour-workweek regulations did not apply to senior managers and others who could exercise control over their own work hours. There were also exceptions for the armed forces, emergency services, police, domestic workers, sea and air transportation workers, and fishermen. The law allowed workers to choose to work more than a 48-hour week; this was called an “opt out” of the 48-hour limit. An individual could “opt out” for a certain period or indefinitely; the “opt out” was required to be voluntary, and an employee could not be fired or treated unfairly for refusing. The employee could cancel an “opt out” agreement at any time, by giving seven days’ notice. There were exceptions for airline staff, delivery drivers, security guards, and workers on ships or boats.

In March 2023, the Ministry of Economy and Labour established the Employment Minimum Hourly Wage Order. In June 2023, Bermuda implemented its first minimum wage. The order set the minimum hourly wage and provided a hybrid payment structure for employees who received gratuities, commissions, and service charges. If basic wages did not equal the minimum hourly rate for employees who received these forms of compensation, the employer would be liable for the difference.

The Bermuda Department of Labour enforced any contractually agreed wage and hour and standards.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) reported violations of wage, hour, or overtime laws were common in the agriculture, chemicals, construction, fairgrounds and theme parks, film and theater, logistics and transport, manufacturing, mining, energy, sports and leisure, utilities, and waste and recycling sectors.

Occupational Safety and Health

The government set occupational safety and health (OSH) standards, which were generally appropriate for the main industries. The law stipulated employers could not place the health and safety of employees at risk. The government proactively identified unsafe conditions. By law workers could remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, and authorities effectively protected employees in this situation. Alleged violations of OSH standards were common in the construction, manufacturing, and agricultural, forestry, and fishing sectors.

The Bermuda Department of Labour and Training enforced OSH standards. Regulations enforced by the department extensively covered the safety of the work environment, occupational safety, and health standards and were appropriate for the main industries.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement

The government effectively enforced minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. His Majesty's Revenue and Customs enforced wage laws, and the HSE was responsible for enforcing OSH laws.

Penalties for violations were generally commensurate with those for similar crimes such as fraud or negligence. Penalties were regularly applied against violators. Although criminal enforcement was available, most minimum wage noncompliance was pursued via civil enforcement through the courts.

The number of labor inspectors was insufficient to enforce compliance. Inspectors had the authority to make unannounced inspections and initiate sanctions

The UK informal economy was estimated to be approximately 10 percent of the overall economy. Approximately 2.9 million businesses traded without being registered for Value Added Tax, the Pay As You Earn Plan, or both and were classified as unregistered. The HSE effectively enforced occupational health and safety laws in all sectors including the informal economy.

In Bermuda, penalties enforced by the Department of Labour and Training were commensurate with those for similar violations and were regularly applied against violators.

c. Disappearance and Abduction

Disappearance

There were no reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

Prolonged Detention without Charges

The law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government generally observed these requirements.

Police in England and Wales had powers to stop and search anyone if they had “reasonable grounds” to suspect the individual could be in possession of drugs, weapons, stolen property, or any item that could be used to commit a crime. In Scotland, guidelines allowed police to make arrests only when police had “reasonable grounds.” The use of stop and search powers had to be deemed “in accordance with the law, necessary, and proportionate,” a refinement introduced after criticism that stop-and-search was being used to target specific racial groups.

In Northern Ireland, the law permitted police officers to stop and search members of the public. In most circumstances, a police officer needed grounds to search an individual; however, some stop-and-search powers allowed individuals to be searched without grounds. By law, persons living

in the 14 overseas territories, including Bermuda, were generally provided the same rights and protections against arbitrary arrest and detentions, with slight variations in each of the jurisdictions.

d. Violations in Religious Freedom

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

e. Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3. Security of the Person

a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The law prohibited such practices, and there were no credible reports government officials employed them.

b. Protection of Children

Child Labor

There was no significant presence of the worst forms of child labor.

The law prohibited all the worst forms of child labor. The law prohibited the employment of children younger than 13 with exceptions for sports, modeling, and paid performances, which depending on local bylaws could require a child performance license. Children younger than 18 were prohibited from working in hazardous environments or after 7 p.m. The law prohibited those younger than 16 from working in an industrial enterprise, including transportation or street trading. Children's work hours were strictly limited and could not interfere with school attendance. Different legislation governed the employment of persons younger than 16 and, while some laws were common across the UK, local bylaws varied. Children could work part-time from age 14, but in some local council areas, children could work part-time from age 13.

In Scotland, children between ages 13 and 16 were allowed to work but only if, for example, their safety, health, development and education were not put at risk. Some local bylaws required children between ages 13 and 16 to obtain a work permit from local authorities. The local authority's education and welfare services had primary responsibility for oversight and enforcement of the permits.

The Department for Education had primary regulatory responsibility for child labor, although local authorities generally handled enforcement. The government effectively enforced the applicable laws.

Penalties were commensurate with those for equally severe crimes.

Penalties were regularly applied against violators.

In Bermuda, children younger than 13 could perform light work of an agricultural, horticultural, or domestic character if a parent or guardian was the employer. Schoolchildren could not work during school hours or more than two hours on school days. No child younger than 15 could work in any industrial undertaking, other than light work, or on any vessel, other than a vessel where only family members worked. Children younger than 16 could not work at night; children ages 16 to 18 were allowed to work until midnight under certain conditions; and employers were required to arrange for safe transport home for girls ages 16 to 18 working until midnight.

The government effectively enforced the law. Penalties were commensurate with those for similar crimes and were regularly applied against violators. The Bermuda Police Service reported no cases of child labor or exploitation of children during the year.

There were no confirmed reports during 2023 of the worst forms of child labor in the British Overseas Territories, but gaps in the law made children vulnerable. The British Overseas Territories of the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas), Montserrat, and Saint Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha did not have functioning labor inspectorates to enforce labor laws. There were legislative gaps in the prohibition of trafficking in children for labor exploitation in Saint Helena, Ascension, and Tristan da Cunha. While criminal laws prohibited trafficking in children for sexual exploitation, they

did not address trafficking in children for labor exploitation. Laws did not exist in Monserrat or the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas) regarding the use of children in drug trafficking and other illicit activities.

Child Marriage

The minimum legal age for marriage was 16. In England, Northern Ireland, and Wales, persons younger than 18 required the written consent of parents or guardians, and the underage person was required to present a birth certificate. In Scotland, parental consent was not required for marriage at age 16. The legal minimum age for marriage was effectively enforced by the governments.

Forcing a person to marry was a criminal offense throughout the country with a maximum prison sentence of seven years if convicted. Forcing a UK citizen into marriage anywhere in the world was a criminal offense in England and Wales. In Scotland, forced marriage was considered an abuse of human rights, as well as a criminal offense. In Northern Ireland, forced marriage was a criminal offense with a maximum prison sentence of seven years if convicted. The government operated a public helpline to provide advice and support to survivors of forced marriage. The government offered lifelong anonymity for survivors of forced marriage to encourage more to come forward.

c. Protection to Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commission for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Provision of First Asylum

In England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the law provided for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and, except for Bermuda, the governments had systems for providing protection to refugees. Asylum was a matter reserved for the national government and was handled centrally by the Home Office, including for most overseas territories. Bermuda's constitution and laws did not provide for granting asylum or refugee status, and the government did not have an established system for providing protection to refugees.

Following the UK's general election in July, the incoming Labour Party government reversed the plans of the Conservative government to transfer asylum seekers to Rwanda under the Safety of Rwanda Act.

d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement

The 2021 census recorded the UK Jewish population at approximately 292,000 persons. There were credible reports of crimes, violence, and

threats of violence motivated by antisemitism.

Since the October 2023 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, the NGO Community Security Trust recorded a large increase in antisemitic incidents across the UK. Reports of antisemitic incidents in the UK in the first half of the year reached a record high of 1,978 anti-Jewish hate incidents, an increase from 964 for the same period in 2023. From January to June there were 121 reported incidents of assault, and cases of damage and desecration of Jewish property rose by 246 percent from 24 cases in 2023. During the same period incidents of threats increased 158 percent to 142, and cases of antisemitism affecting persons and their property in education increased by 119 percent to 162 cases. Data published by the Home Office showed a doubling of antisemitic attacks (to 3,282 incidents) in the first three months of the year compared to the previous year.

On January 29, a potentially lethal antisemitic attack was averted in London by employees of a kosher store, who fended off a knife-wielding attacker.

On February 12, a Jewish chaplain for universities in the Yorkshire area and his family were subjected to death threats and harassment after a campaign was launched to oust him from his position because of his Israeli Defense Force service during the Israel-Hamas War. The chaplain and his family were forced to go into hiding because of the campaign.

In February, the government announced a £70 million (\$89 million) grant for security and protection of Jewish communities. On July 17, the government

endorsed Global Guidelines for Countering Antisemitism at a meeting of the World Jewish Congress Special Envoys and Coordinators Combating Antisemitism Forum in Buenos Aires. On October 1, London Mayor Sadiq Khan announced an additional £875,000 (\$1.1 million) in funding for grassroots community projects “support community projects tackling extremism, hate, intolerance and radicalisation across London,” and on October 7, the government announced funding of £7 million (\$8.9 million) to tackle antisemitism in schools and universities.

For further information on incidents of antisemitism in the country, whether or not those incidents were motivated by religion, and for reporting on the ability of Jews to exercise freedom of religion or belief, see the Department of State’s annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.