

FEAR AND CONTROL: SAFEGUARDING RISKS IN HIGH-CONTROL GROUPS IN THE UK

A SURVIVING UNIVERSAL UK PEER-LED REPORT

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SURVIVING UNIVERSAL UK®

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NOT PERSECUTION®**



SAFEGUARDING RISKS IN HIGH-CONTROL GROUPS IN THE UK

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Content Note

This report contains references to coercive control, child abuse, sexual abuse, financial exploitation, and other forms of harm associated with high-control groups.

Some readers may find the material distressing.

Survivor testimonies are included with consent and have been anonymised to protect identities. Care has been taken to present these accounts with respect and sensitivity, in line with trauma-informed practice.

Readers are encouraged to look after their wellbeing while engaging with this report.

Verification

This report has been independently affirmed by The Rev'd Prof Helen Hall.

The full Certificate of Affirmation is included on page 37.

Executive Summary

Fear and Control: Safeguarding Risks in High-Control Groups in the UK presents the most current survivor-led evidence base on cultic harm in Britain. The findings demonstrate that high-control groups are not rare or marginal. They are active within communities across the UK, frequently registered as charities, operating as places of worship, and embedded in wider international networks.

This report draws on **59** survivor accounts — a significant dataset given the stigma, secrecy, and fear that often prevent disclosure. It builds on previous survivor-led studies, including the Family Survival Trust’s 2022 survey, by providing the most up-to-date evidence of cultic harm in the UK.

Key Findings

- 89.8% of groups reported are still active.
- 94.9% are part of larger networks or international movements.
- 74.1% are registered UK charities.
- 88.1% operate as places of worship.
- 56.9% of survivors were under 18 when first exposed.
- 91.5% said children were involved in their group.

More than 80% experienced coercive tactics of fear, enforced obedience, isolation, and financial exploitation.

Groups most often target people in crisis, women, Black and migrant communities, and children.

Survivor Voices

Survivor testimony illustrates the lived reality behind these statistics:

“I was told to cut off my parents because they didn’t attend the church.”

“I was encouraged to stop psychiatric medication and take financial risks under promises of manifestation.”

Executive Summary

These accounts confirm that involvement in high-control groups is rarely a conscious choice. Many survivors were born into such groups, introduced by family or friends, or recruited in moments of personal crisis. Others describe being approached in public spaces or educational settings. Regardless of pathway, once inside, survivors consistently report being subjected to the same key methods of control: fear, isolation, unquestioned obedience, and financial exploitation.

A Safeguarding and Equalities Crisis

The evidence highlights:

- Children are central to cultic abuse, with many born into groups or recruited while under 18.
- Women, particularly single women, are disproportionately targeted and exploited.
- Black communities, immigrants, and people in crisis are deliberately approached, showing that high-control groups exploit existing social inequalities.
- Groups are geographically widespread, with reports clustered in London (particularly South London), Manchester, Birmingham, and Glasgow.

High-control groups exploit trust, vulnerability, and social structures. They do not exist only in isolated or hidden spaces but are embedded within charities, schools, high streets, and neighbourhoods across the UK.

“Cultic abuse is one of the most underestimated and unrecognised forms of abuse in the UK. Survivors are falling through the gaps in safeguarding because this issue is still not being taken seriously. The evidence in this report shows that high-control groups are active, organised, and exploiting communities today. Unless urgent action is taken, more children, women, and families will continue to be harmed.”

— Rachael Reign, Founder, Surviving Universal UK

Introduction & Context

Despite clear parallels with recognised safeguarding issues such as domestic abuse and child sexual exploitation, **cultic abuse has not received equivalent statutory recognition in the United Kingdom.** Survivors consistently describe experiences of fear, financial exploitation, isolation, and coercive control.

The current absence of recognition means that many survivors remain without adequate protection or access to support.

The consequences of this lack of recognition are profound. Children are being born into high-control groups, women and girls are disproportionately targeted, and Black and migrant communities are deliberately targeted.

Survivors repeatedly report that when they seek help, their experiences are minimised or dismissed, causing many to fall through existing safeguarding systems and not gain access to justice.

The purpose of this report is to present **survivor-led evidence of the nature, scale, and impact of cultic abuse in the UK today.** Its findings are intended to inform statutory bodies, policymakers, practitioners, and the wider public. The evidence is based on an **anonymous national survey of 59 survivors of high-control groups, conducted between late July and early September 2025.**

Given the stigma, secrecy, and fear of reprisals that often prevent disclosure, this dataset represents a significant contribution to understanding the risks and realities of cultic harm across the United Kingdom today.

This report was authored by Rachael Reign, survivor-researcher and Founder of Surviving Universal UK, a grassroots victim and survivor advocacy organisation addressing cultic and spiritual abuse. The organisation supports all survivors and their families, with a specialist focus on championing the voices of Black victims and survivors who are too often overlooked.

Methodology

This report is based on an anonymous national survey of survivors of high-control groups in the United Kingdom. The survey was designed to capture both **quantitative** data (for example, whether groups were active, registered as charities, or involved children) and **qualitative** testimony (survivors' personal experiences, safety concerns, and reflections on how they became involved). **This mixed-methods** approach was chosen to ensure that the report presents not only the scale of harm through figures and percentages, but also the lived reality through survivors' own words.

Survey design and distribution

The survey was developed by Surviving Universal UK and made available online between late July and early September 2025. It was distributed through survivor networks, social media, and community contacts in order to reach as broad a range of participants as possible. The survey was voluntary, open to anyone in the UK who had experienced involvement in a high-control group.

Anonymity and consent

Anonymity was a central principle of the design. Survivors were informed that their responses would remain anonymous, with the option to provide contact details only if they wished to be approached for further research. This approach was intended to empower survivors to share their experiences without fear of reprisal, stigma, or judgement. Testimonies included in this report are presented with consent and have been anonymised to protect identities.

Methodology

Participation

In total, 59 survivors completed the survey. While the sample is self-selecting, the scale of participation is significant given the stigma, secrecy, and fear that often prevent disclosure. These responses provide a substantial survivor-led evidence base, highlighting consistent patterns of risk and harm across diverse groups and demographics.

Trauma-informed approach

The survey design was guided by trauma-informed principles:

- Questions were framed sensitively, with space for survivors to describe their experiences in their own words.
- Participants were offered the choice of how much to disclose.
- Survivors were asked explicitly whether they consented to their words being quoted in this report.

Support for participants

Care was taken to ensure that participation did not leave survivors without support. Throughout the survey, participants were signposted to Surviving Universal UK for help if they felt distressed or wished to discuss their experiences further. Contact details were provided so that participants could reach out for advice, advocacy, or safeguarding support. This ensured that the research process itself reflected the organisation's commitment to survivor wellbeing and advocacy.

About Surviving Universal UK

Surviving Universal UK (SUUK) is a registered Community Interest Company (CIC 15815968) and a grassroots victim and survivor advocacy organisation addressing cultic, spiritual, and high-control group abuse. The organisation was founded in 2022 by Rachael Reign, a survivor-researcher, advocate, and campaigner with lived experience of cultic harm and spiritual abuse.

SUUK is the first organisation of its kind in the UK to be Black-founded, survivor-led, and to specialise in supporting Black victims and survivors of cultic abuse, while providing support to all survivors and families affected by high-control groups. This equalities-driven approach ensures that issues of race, gender, and social vulnerability are embedded within safeguarding responses.

SUUK supports survivors and families through advocacy, safeguarding expertise, and awareness-raising initiatives. Its work includes:

- Providing direct advocacy and frontline support to survivors and families.
- Developing and delivering accredited training on safeguarding and coercive control in high-control groups.
- Conducting research to evidence risks and amplify survivor voices.
- Campaigning for policy and regulatory reform to address cultic abuse as a safeguarding and equalities issue.

The organisation works in partnership with local authorities, safeguarding boards, voluntary sector partners, and the press to raise awareness, strengthen accountability, and ensure that survivor experiences inform both public debate and policy change.

SUUK operates as a lived-experience-led organisation, guided by the principle that survivors are experts in their own experiences and must be central to the design of responses and reforms.

Profile of Groups

The survey confirms that high-control groups in the UK are active, organised, and deeply embedded within communities. Almost nine in ten survivors (**89.8%**) reported that the group they were involved with is still operating **today**. For many, this continuity was part of the harm, as survivors described the frustration of seeing organisations continue unchallenged.

One survivor explained:

“They’re still there now, still recruiting on the same streets, and it feels like nothing I went through mattered. No one stopped them.”

Nearly all respondents (**94.9%**) said their group was part of a wider network or international movement. These groups were rarely isolated; instead, they operated through multiple branches across the UK and abroad. Survivors reported that this structure created a sense of legitimacy while also making it harder to challenge or leave.

“They said we were part of a worldwide family. Really it meant they controlled every aspect of my life, and even when I left, I had no escape because there was always another branch nearby.”

89.8%

Profile of Groups

Religious organisations were the most common setting. **88.1%** of survivors described their group as a place of worship or faith-based community. Survivors repeatedly highlighted how religious language and doctrine were used to justify control and abuse:

“The pastor told us questioning him was questioning God. Scripture was twisted to make us obedient, and people believed it because it came from the man of God.”

A striking finding was that **74.1%** of survivors said their group was a **registered UK charity**. Several respondents reflected on how this gave harmful organisations legitimacy and protection:

“Because it was a charity, people assumed it was safe. They used that status to get money and trust – it was the perfect cover.”

Together, these findings suggest that high-control groups in the UK are largely operating under the legitimacy of religious settings and charitable status. This raises serious concerns about gaps in safeguarding, legal frameworks, and regulatory oversight.

88.1%

Children and Safeguarding

The findings reveal that children are at the heart of cultic abuse in the UK. Over half of survivors (**56.9%**) reported that they were under **18** when they were first exposed to a high-control group, while an overwhelming **91.5%** said that children were involved in their group.

These figures confirm that cultic harm is not only an adult safeguarding issue but a child protection crisis.

For many, involvement was not a choice. Survivors described being born into high-control groups and raised in environments of fear, isolation, and coercion.

“I never had a childhood outside the church. I was born into it, and every day of my life was controlled from the start.”

Others recalled the use of fear to keep children compliant, often framed in spiritual or supernatural terms:

“As a child I was told that if I disobeyed, demons would get me. I grew up terrified of everything outside the church.”

Parents were also placed under intense pressure to keep their children within the group, with leaders threatening that families would be cursed or destroyed if they left. Survivors identified this as a form of coercive control that used spiritual abuse to keep both parents and children in line.

“My parents were told their children would be cursed if they left. We grew up being terrified of the outside world.”

91.5%

Source: (SUUK) Survivor Survey, 2025 (n = 59)

Children and Safeguarding

The long-term impact of childhood exposure was clear. Survivors who left as young adults described struggling to integrate into society, lacking basic social skills, and experiencing deep isolation.

“When I finally got out, I didn’t know how to live. I had no friends outside, no idea how to cope. I felt like I had been raised in a bubble and dropped into a world I didn’t understand.”

As lead researcher, Rachael Reign observes:

“If over 90% of survivors say children were involved, then there are children in schools, GP surgeries, and communities right now who are living in cultic abuse — and it is not being recognised. These young people are falling completely through the cracks.”

Cultic emotional abuse — especially sustained verbal/psychological control — produces brain changes that mirror those seen in physical harm. Developmental neuroscientist **Professor Eamon McCrory** (UCL/Anna Freud Centre) told UK MPs in April 2025 that **“verbal abuse reshapes a child’s brain, particularly the circuits related to threat and reward,”** making the world feel danger-laden and undermining trust and connection.

In high-control environments like cults, sustained coercion and emotional abuse keep children’s neurobiological threat systems ‘on’, driving hypervigilance, anxiety, and impaired attachment. The neurological consequences are profound and often indistinguishable from the damage caused by physical abuse.

Their unmet needs can surface later as mental health crises, addiction, or further exploitation. This is a systemic failure, and one that must be urgently addressed.

Together, the evidence and testimony show that children are not peripheral in high-control groups — they are central. Cultic abuse involves children directly, grooms them from birth, and exposes them to lifelong harm.

Children and Safeguarding

One survivor disclosed that they were raised in a church that has summer camps. They recalled...

“There was a summer camp that my church held for kids primary school age and I was again forced to go, many years I experienced the “fire tunnel” which TERRIFIED ME! I would have panic attacks about these. I dreaded the days I would walk through the fire tunnel because I didn’t want to have fits on the floor and start screaming just like all the other times I witnessed. There was a few times where I was in the “fire tunnel” and was pushed down to the floor by an adult youth leader and was trying my absolute hardest to stay conscious while all my friends were screaming and crying. But it’s the “Holy Spirit” so it’s okay.”

Source: (SUUK) Survivor Survey, 2025 (n = 59)

Key Methods of Control

Survivors described remarkably consistent patterns of coercion across different groups, showing that cultic abuse is systematic rather than incidental. These methods mirror wider coercive control frameworks but are applied in ways that exploit trust, belief, and community.

Fear

Fear was the most commonly reported tactic: **86.4%** of survivors said fear was central to their group's control. For children, this often meant vivid and terrifying images of **hell, fire, and demons**. For adults, the threats were more linear — disaster, illness, poverty, or harm to their children if they disobeyed.

“As a child I was told that if I disobeyed, demons would get me.”

Lead researcher, Rachael Reign, notes that safeguarding leads must be trained to recognise signs of fear-based coercion:

“Religion should not force people into isolation or radical overnight changes. When someone suddenly cuts themselves off from society, abandons healthy attachments, or undergoes an extreme ideological shift under pressure, those are warning signs of radicalisation”

Total Obedience to leadership

Almost **85%** of survivors reported being required to give unquestioned obedience to leaders. Survivors explained that loyalty was framed as proof of faith, and questioning was equated with rebellion against God.

“The pastor said obedience was proof of faith. If you disobeyed him, you disobeyed God.”

Healthy leadership (religious or otherwise) Rachael explains, *“allows for agency, questioning, and the freedom to leave. In contrast, abusive leadership in high control groups removes choice altogether. Faith and community plays an important role in society, and is often a source of hope and strength to many. The data shows that unfortunately, this trust is being weaponised and used to control individuals within abusive groups.”*

Key Methods of Control

Isolation

83.1% of survivors described being isolated from family, friends, and society. The most common tactics were cutting off family ties and discouraging school friendships, but survivors also reported strict control of information.

“I was told people outside were evil. I stopped talking to my school friends because they (cult) said the world was corrupt.”

Isolation robs people of their human rights — their ability to connect with family, community, culture, and even their own identity. Cults deliberately dismantle healthy attachments so the only ties left are those controlled within the group.

Financial exploitation

81.4% of survivors said financial exploitation was a central tactic, with many reporting tithes, **“seed offerings,”** or pressure to hand over wages, benefits, and savings.

“We gave everything — wages, benefits, even savings. They told us if we didn’t give, our families would be cursed.”

Considering that 74.1% of reported groups were registered UK charities, it makes sense to ask what must be done. The Charity Commission does require annual accounts, but survivors described limited meaningful scrutiny. Harmful groups are hiding behind charity status. There should be compulsory independent trustees, stricter reporting requirements, and real oversight of whether these organisations are delivering public benefit — or exploiting members.

74.1%

Source: (SUUK) Survivor Survey, 2025 (n = 59)

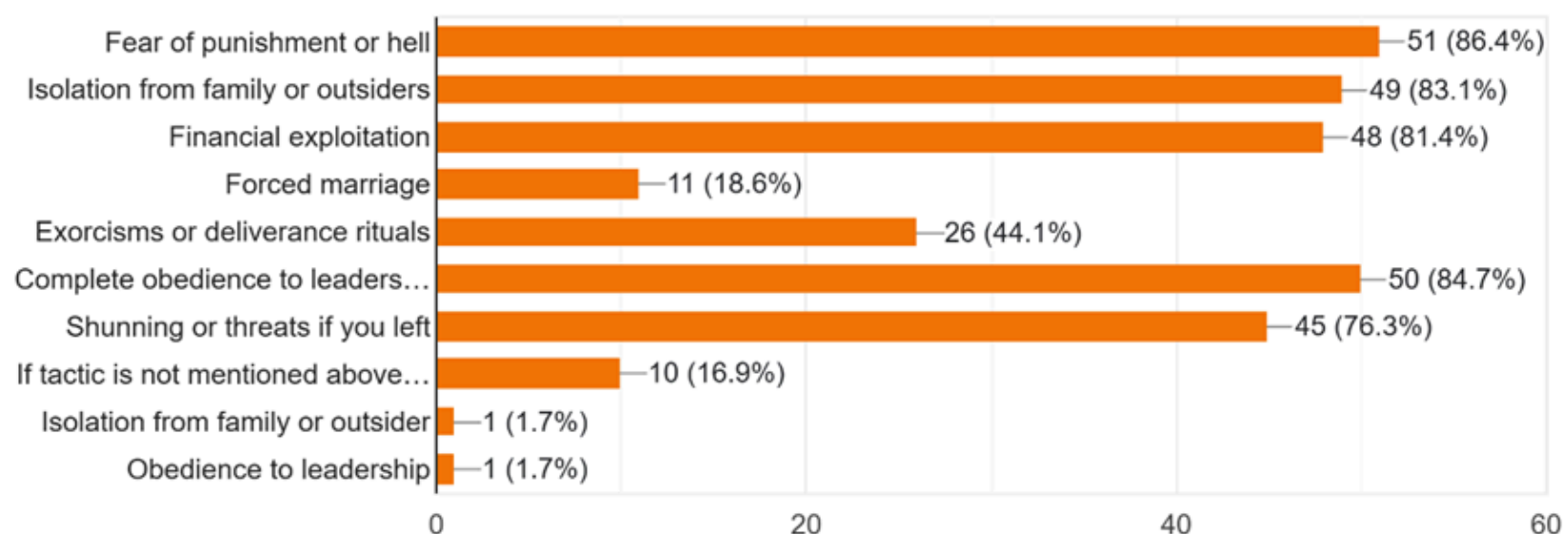
Key Methods of Control

Shunning and exit punishment

Over three-quarters of survivors (**76.3%**) said they faced threats of shunning, expulsion, or punishment if they attempted to leave. For many, leaving meant losing everything at once — family, home, community, and identity.

“When I left, my family were ordered to cut me off completely. Overnight I had no parents, no siblings, no community.”

Leaving a high-control group is often half the battle. Survivors are suddenly homeless, resource-less, and isolated. They are traumatised by being rejected by their own families, yet lack the language or trust to explain their experiences to professionals. Shunning is emotional abuse, and it should be recognised as such by statutory services. Housing, mental health, and social care must respond to the complexity of this harm and create safe pathways for survivors.



Source: (SUUK) Survivor Survey, 2025 (n = 59)

Key Methods of Control

Specific practices

The survey also revealed reports of deliverance rituals, exorcisms (**44.1%**), and forced marriage (**18.6%**). Survivors emphasised that these practices were often presented under different names but carried the same underlying harm.

“I was taken into a back room for a ‘deliverance session.’ They shouted, pushed, and said demons were inside me. I was a child.”

There needs to be less worry about offending people and more about protecting them. Exorcisms on minors are harmful. Forced marriage is harmful. Until we name these harms, they get normalised as ‘culture’ or ‘freedom of religion.’ Survivors need professionals to call these practices what they are, so the harm can be recognised and addressed.

44.1%

Who is Targeted

The findings show that **high-control groups deliberately target vulnerable populations**. Survivors identified recurring patterns of recruitment focused on people already experiencing disadvantage, marginalisation, or crisis. These patterns demonstrate that cultic abuse is strategic.

People in crisis

The largest group identified was people in crisis (**84.7%**). Survivors described how those experiencing **financial hardship, mental health struggles, or homelessness** were singled out as prime recruits.

“They told me if I trusted God and obeyed the pastor, all my money problems would end. I gave everything I had left.”

Lead researcher Rachael Reign explains:

“Cults exploit society’s wounds. When someone has repeated unmet needs and then a group appears promising the solution to all of their problems, serious harm can occur. Financial hardship and mental health crisis are especially exploited. People are desperate, and cults always claim to be the answer.”

Children and youth

83.1% of survivors said children and young people are **targeted**. Groups often sought out young people directly, or pressured parents to raise them within the group. Survivors explained that this left them socially isolated and vulnerable.

“I was recruited as a teenager. They told me my friends at school were corrupt, so I cut everyone off.”

With reduced youth services, and young people being left to their own devices socially and practically, cults capitalise on the issue. Children are naturally more susceptible — they lack life experience, they have free time, they want belonging. That makes them easy targets. Frontline professionals in schools and youth services must be trained to identify and respond when a child is at risk of cultic abuse.

Who is Targeted

Women and girls

71.2% said women — particularly single women — were targeted. Survivors reported financial exploitation, isolation, and coercion, often framed as spiritual duty.

“As a single mum, I was told God would punish me if I didn’t hand over my benefits. I was desperate to protect my kids, so I gave.”

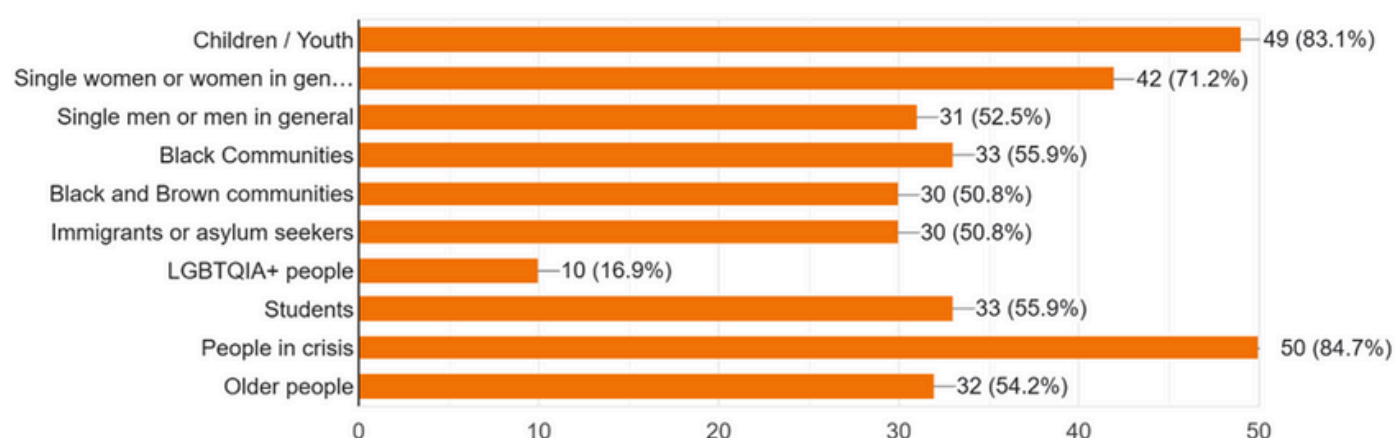
Women face existing societal pressures — to provide for their children, to hold everything together. When a group comes promising safety, stability, and belonging, of course it appeals. But what women actually face is coercion, financial abuse, and exploitation. This is gendered harm, and it must be recognised as such.

Black communities

55.9% of survivors reported that Black communities are disproportionately targeted. Many explained that practices such as exorcisms or deliverance were normalised under the banner of culture or spirituality.

“I was beaten during a ‘deliverance session’ to drive out demons. They told me it was normal.”

We must draw a clear line between culture and harm. Too often, abuse in Black communities is dismissed as cultural or spirituality. But this refusal to act denies Black people the right to be safeguarded like everyone else. Many people don’t call it a cult — they call it church or ministry — but the lifestyle is cultic, and the abuse is real.



Source: (SUUK) Survivor Survey, 2025 (n = 59)

Who is Targeted

Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers

50.8% of survivors said migrants and asylum seekers are targeted. Survivors described arriving in the UK feeling lost, lonely, and disconnected, only to be drawn into high-control groups offering belonging and community.

“I had no family here. They welcomed me, gave me a home, and then used that to control me.”

New arrivals to the UK often don't have safe pathways into healthy communities. They gravitate towards whatever looks familiar, and cults know this. There aren't enough safe cultural hubs for migrants, so they end up in unsafe environments. This is a gap in integration and safeguarding.

50.8%

Pathways into Groups

The survey shows that entry into high-control groups is rarely voluntary. Survivors identified four main pathways into involvement: being born into the group (**44.8%**), being recruited by a friend or partner (**22.4%**), being approached on the street (**8.6%**), and a range of other pathways including family connections, crisis points, and self-referral (**24.1%**).

Born into the group

Almost half of survivors were born into their group, making cultic abuse an intergenerational safeguarding issue. This demonstrates repeated failures across systems, as one generation of children grows up in harmful environments and then raises the next within the same structures.

“I never knew anything else. From birth, my whole life was in the church — school, friends, everything was controlled by them.”

When children are born into cultic environments, they are denied a healthy life from the start. They grow up without adequate education, without access to healthcare, often without healthy attachments or boundaries. Abuse is normalised. When they eventually leave, if they can, they are invisible to statutory services and left to start life from scratch.

Recruited by friends or partners

Trusted relationships were another key entry point. Over a fifth of survivors (**22.4%**) said they were brought into a group by a friend, partner, or close relative. Groups deliberately exploited survivors' healthy attachments, encouraging members to recruit loved ones.

“My boyfriend brought me along. I thought it was just church. Within months I was told to move in, cut off my family, and hand over my wages.”

Cults target your healthy attachments first. Friends and partners become recruiters, often without realising. Safeguarding frameworks must reflect this reality — recruitment is not strangers luring people in, it's happening through those survivors trust the most.

Pathways into Groups

Street recruitment

8.6% of survivors said they were approached in public, given flyers, or invited into events. Survivors explained that these approaches were legitimised by groups' **registered charity status**, which gave them credibility.

“I was invited on the high street. They showed me the flyer with the charity number and said it was a community project. I trusted it.”

Rachael emphasises the risk:

“Street recruitment is still happening openly in the UK. Because so many of these groups are registered charities, they carry automatic legitimacy. That status is louder than survivors’ voices. Street approaches should be recognised as a safeguarding concern in themselves.”

Other and varied pathways

A further **24.1%** described varied or complex routes into groups: through family connections, crisis points, or self-referral under the guise of another service. Survivors emphasised that cults are highly adaptable in their recruitment strategies.

“I walked in after seeing them online. I was going through a breakdown, and they promised answers. Within weeks I was trapped.”

Cults are very adaptable because they have to be. Membership is a revolving door: people leave, people are shunned, so groups are constantly seeking new recruits. They exhaust every possible pathway — family, friends, crisis points, strangers — because replacing members is central to survival.

Overall insight

Across all pathways, the evidence shows that involvement in high-control groups is not about informed voluntary decision-making. Survivors are groomed, coerced, and recruited at vulnerable moments, often by those they trust most. The diversity of pathways demonstrates that cults can reach anyone — children, adults, migrants, people in crisis — and that safeguarding responses must reflect this reality.

Geography

The survey confirms that cultic abuse is not confined to rural settings but is embedded in urban communities across the United Kingdom. Survivors reported groups operating in major cities including **London**, **Manchester**, **Birmingham**, and **Glasgow**. This challenges the widespread misconception that cults only exist in remote or inaccessible places.

“Our church was on the high street. Everyone could see it, but no one saw the harm.”

South London

South London emerged as a clear hotspot, reflecting both survivor demographics and the presence of faith-based groups known for abusive practices. Religious cults and so-called church movements are particularly concentrated in this area, which has a large Black population and communities disproportionately targeted by high-control groups.

Rachael Reign explains:

“South London is unfortunately home to many church-based cults. These groups are visible in the community, and they target areas with large Black populations where people are looking for belonging and support. This reflects broader patterns of spiritual and ritual abuse in the UK.”

Areas where cultic activity was reported

One in three survivors (around 31.9%) named London — often specifying South London (including areas such as Peckham, Croydon, Bermondsey, and Wandsworth). Others identified activity in Birmingham and the wider West Midlands, Manchester, and Milton Keynes/Northamptonshire.

Reports also came from Scotland (Glasgow, Aberdeen, Eskdalemuir, Dumbarton), Wales (Newport, Llanelli, Prestatyn), and scattered towns including Derby, Essex (Chelmsford), Exeter, and Horsham (West Sussex). While London emerged most strongly, the diversity of locations demonstrates that cultic abuse is a national issue — survivors consistently described groups that were UK-wide, multi-branch, or spread across multiple regions, embedding themselves in everyday communities.

Geography

Other cities

Reports highlighted cultic activity in **Manchester, Birmingham,** and **Glasgow**. These findings align with wider safeguarding data, such as *Children in Need* reports (2024), which identify faith-based harm as more frequently reported in northern regions. Survivors emphasised that these groups are visible in everyday spaces — community halls, high streets, and local centres.

“They recruited me at a community centre. It was supposed to be a place for support, but it became a place of control.”

We know Black and migrant survivors are less likely to engage with the police. That means the true scale of harm in these areas may be much greater than current data suggests. Cultic abuse must be treated as a national safeguarding issue, but it has to start with local recognition and local action.

Visibility

Survivors made clear that high-control groups are not hidden away but integrated into everyday community life. Their visibility is reinforced by charitable status, which provides legitimacy and access to public spaces.

Wherever there is deprivation, wherever there are people in crisis, there will be cults. These areas need to take extra safeguarding precautions.

Survivor Voices

Survivor Voices

The following testimonies are anonymised but presented in survivors' own words. They illustrate the lived reality of cultic abuse in the UK.

Children & Youth

Children were denied education, freedom, and safety.

“ I was manipulated and exploited and was pressured into doing things against my will like fundraising instead of studying etc.”

“As a teenager I was made to sit through hours of sermons about obedience. If I fell asleep, I was shouted at in front of everyone.”

“At 17 I was told to leave school because education was ‘worldly.’ I still struggle to catch up now.”

“We were made to fast for days without food or water. They said it was spiritual discipline.”

VAWG & Sexuality

Women faced coercion, shame, and exploitation, often justified as spiritual duty.

“The church made me ashamed of my body. As a girl I was told I was responsible for men’s sin. I still struggle with self-worth.”

“Being gay was treated as demonic. They tried deliverance sessions on me for years.”

“Women were expected to volunteer long hours for the ‘good of the kingdom’. My personality totally changed while I was with them for 6 years. I feel completely psychologically raped by their behaviours”

“When I tried to come out as a lesbian I was subjected to conversion therapy multiple times, exorcism and forced baptism at the hands of my youth leaders and church congregation.”

Survivor Voices

Finances

Groups routinely exploited members financially, demanding money under threat of spiritual harm.

“Then there was the pressure to give offerings that I didn't have & I felt the pastor staring at me when I didn't get up”

“When I questioned where the money went, I was humiliated publicly. They said I was cursed for doubting.”

Mental Health

Survivors were denied medical care and told to replace treatment with faith.

“I was told my depression was demons and that I should stop taking medication. When I got worse, they said it was my fault for lacking faith.”

“I was forced to fast for days as punishment. I fainted at work but was told it was a sign of spiritual weakness.”

Leaving & Shunning

Leaving often meant immediate isolation, homelessness, and emotional abuse.

“When I disagreed with the pastor, they told the whole congregation to avoid me. Overnight I became an enemy.”

“When I left, my family cut me off completely. I had no home, no job, no support. I had to start over from scratch.”

“I was told if I spoke to outsiders, God would kill me. I lived in constant terror of saying the wrong thing.”

Survivor Voices

“Some young people would share very sensitive and traumatic things at youth group which was not appropriate.”

“I have PTSD. I am traumatised. I have struggled to hold down a job. In my teen years I was sexually assaulted (groped) repeatedly by an adult male congregation member who is now in prison”

“You were shown images of Armageddon and the end of the world constantly depicting people dying, and I suffered nightmares for years.”

“I observed and experienced emotional control through constant monitoring of members’ behaviour, discouragement of independent thought, and fear-based teachings about the outside world.”

“I would have horrific daydreams in primary school, and constantly fear abandonment.”

These voices confirm that cultic abuse is not hidden or marginal. It is happening in plain sight — in families, faith settings, charities, schools, and communities across the UK. Survivors’ words must guide safeguarding responses, policy change, and public understanding.

Discussion & Implications

Safeguarding and child protection

Cultic abuse has not yet been recognised alongside other safeguarding issues such as child sexual exploitation or domestic abuse. This failure is partly due to its perceived complexity: the term “cult” means different things to different people, and professionals already stretched by caseloads have not been guided to see it as a core safeguarding concern.

Media sensationalism has further reinforced the idea that cults are rare or remote, rather than widespread and embedded.

International precedent

France is currently the only European country with a specific legal instrument targeting cultic abuses: the About-Picard Law (2001), which created the offence of abus de faiblesse (“abuse of weakness”) and allows dissolution of organisations found to practise sectarian abuses. France has also strengthened anti-cult measures in recent years.

The UK has no equivalent statutory framework. This gap leaves survivors here without recognition or protection, and demonstrates how far behind we are compared to our neighbours.

The absence of such legislation places the UK far behind its European neighbour, despite France being just across the border. The lesson is clear: reform is both possible and within reach. Unless cultic abuse is explicitly named in safeguarding practice and law, children and adults will remain invisible.

Equalities and Disproportionality

The evidence shows clear patterns of disproportionality. Black communities, women, migrants, and people in crisis were repeatedly identified as targets. This reflects the wider reality that **society's most vulnerable are most at risk of cultic harm**, and until safeguarding frameworks close this loophole, exploitation will continue across generations.

Equalities bodies, including the EHRC, race equality boards, and women's organisations, must acknowledge cultic abuse as a major and current safeguarding issue. Doing so would safeguard human rights, strengthen equalities, and ensure women, Black communities, and migrants are not left unprotected. **Recognition is the first step to action.**

Methods of control

Survivors described near-identical methods across groups: fear, enforced obedience, isolation, financial exploitation, and shunning. These are not matters of faith or cultural practice — they are forms of coercive control. Coercive control removes agency, forces individuals into behaviours they would not otherwise choose, and normalises abuse.

If statutory agencies fail to name these methods for what they are, survivors will continue to be failed by systems that cannot even recognise the harm being experienced. Survivors described being denied education, isolated from family, financially exploited, and subjected to violent rituals — all without intervention.

Regulation and Accountability

Nearly **three-quarters** of the groups reported were **registered UK charities**. Survivors described how charity status was used as a shield against scrutiny, granting legitimacy and access to vulnerable people. These charities are being funded by the UK taxpayer via Gift Aid. This highlights the urgent need for reform of the Charity Commission's oversight.

At present, trustees are often drawn from within the group itself, leaving no independence and no accountability.

Possible reforms include:

- Requiring at least one independent trustee with no ties to the organisation.
- Introducing unannounced inspections of charities' services — similar to Ofsted — to review safeguarding practice and community conduct.
- Commissioning independent monitoring of charities' public presence, social media, and media reports.
- Strengthening the Charity Commission's powers to investigate concerns proactively, not only after harm has been reported.

Without such reforms, the regulator will remain reactive rather than preventative, and vulnerable people will continue to be exploited under the cover of charitable status.

Regulation and Accountability

National but locally embedded issue

At present, statutory responses remain fragmented. Cultic abuse is so under-recognised and under-reported that it is treated as almost non-existent. Survivors themselves are forced to produce peer-led evidence, such as this report, to prove their abuse should be taken seriously. For national recognition to be meaningful, local authorities must lead the way. This includes reviewing safeguarding procedures, equipping teams to recognise cultic abuse, and ensuring they are not legitimising or partnering with harmful groups by accident. Action must begin locally if it is to scale nationally.

Survivor testimony

Across all findings, survivors repeatedly spoke of being silenced, disbelieved, or dismissed. Validation is vital — but validation alone is not enough. Survivors do not need sympathy; they need systems that act. Actions must speak louder than words. Policymakers and professionals must not only listen to survivors but also implement changes that prevent further harm.

Recommendations

The findings of this report point to urgent gaps in safeguarding, regulation, and equalities. To address cultic abuse effectively, the following actions are recommended:

1. Safeguarding Recognition

- Explicitly recognise cultic and spiritual abuse within UK safeguarding frameworks.
- Add spiritual and ritual abuse (SARA) into statutory safeguarding training, alongside child sexual exploitation, radicalisation, and domestic abuse.

2. Child Protection

- Prioritise children raised in high-control groups as a child protection concern.
- Equip schools, youth workers, and frontline professionals to identify and respond to cultic abuse.
- Establish support pathways for children and young people leaving high-control groups, including education, housing, and mental health support.

3. Regulation, Accountability and Policy

- Support campaigns to extend the coercive control offence beyond intimate/family settings in the Serious Crime Act 2015
- Strengthen the Charity Commission's oversight powers with proactive authority to investigate and intervene.
- Require at least one independent trustee in every registered charity.
- Introduce random, unannounced inspections of charities, similar to Ofsted visits.
- Establish independent complaints procedures so survivors can report concerns safely and without fear of reprisal.
- Create a dedicated watchdog role or unit within the Charity Commission to proactively identify groups exploiting charitable status for coercive, abusive or financial purposes.

Recommendations

4. Equalities and Disproportionality

- Recognise cultic and spiritual abuse as both a safeguarding and an equalities issue, given the disproportionate impact on Black communities, women, migrants, and people in crisis.
- Confront the misuse of culture and religion as a shield for abuse, affirming that safeguarding must always take priority.
- Ensure equalities bodies (EHRC, race equality boards, women's organisations) explicitly include cultic abuse in their remits.

5. Awareness, Education, and Training

- Develop national awareness campaigns to inform the public that cultic abuse is a safeguarding issue happening in the UK today.
- Provide specialist training for teachers, social workers, health professionals, police, and safeguarding leads.
- Embed survivor expertise in the design and delivery of awareness and training, recognising that lived experience is essential to effective practice.

Working with Experts

All recommendations should be taken forward in partnership with survivor-led organisations. The Family Survival Trust, Surviving Universal UK, alongside others, offers lived experience, specialist safeguarding expertise, and direct engagement with communities most at risk. Without this expertise at the table, reforms risk being ineffective or disconnected from the realities survivors face. Survivor-led organisations must therefore have a seat at the table in shaping policy, training, and regulatory reform.

Conclusion

Cultic abuse is active, organised, and operating in plain sight — in schools, homes, community halls, and places of worship. Survivors have made clear that children are being raised in fear, women and migrants are being exploited, and entire communities are being drawn into coercive systems under the cover of charity and faith.

The findings expose a profound gap in safeguarding, equalities, and regulation. Cultic abuse is not yet recognised within statutory frameworks, leaving survivors invisible and perpetrators unchallenged. Without urgent reform, the cycle of intergenerational harm will continue.

The message from survivors is clear: listen, recognise, and act. Listening must be followed by validation; validation must be followed by action. Safeguarding agencies, regulators, and policymakers have the opportunity — and the responsibility — to respond.

Cultic abuse is happening here and now. It is hidden in plain sight. The time for recognition, accountability, and protection is long overdue.

“For too long, survivors have been forced to prove our own abuse. This report shows the harm is real, the patterns are clear, and the system must change. Cultic abuse is not hidden — it is happening in plain sight. Now it must be recognised and acted upon.”

— Rachael Reign, Survivor-Researcher and Advocate

Founder & Director, Surviving Universal UK

For further information contact SUUK on
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Verification

The following certificate has been provided by The Rev'd Prof Helen Hall, affirming the accuracy and integrity of the data presented in this report.

Certificate of Affirmation

This to certify that the information contained in "FEAR AND CONTROL: SAFEGUARDING RISKS IN HIGH-CONTROL GROUPS IN THE UK A SURVIVING UNIVERSAL UK PEER LED-REPORT 2025" is an accurate and reasonable reflection of the data gathered in the survey by Rachael Reign "Cultic Activity in the UK".

23rd September 2025

The Rev'd Prof Helen Hall



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This report was researched and authored by Rachael Reign, survivor-researcher, advocate, and founder of Surviving Universal UK — the UK's first Black-founded and survivor-led organisation specialising in supporting victims and survivors of cultic and spiritual abuse, while working inclusively with all communities.

Surviving Universal UK extends gratitude to every individual and organisation who continues to push for recognition, accountability, and justice.

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