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An Exploration of the Profile and Characteristics of Human Trafficking in Northern Ireland

Emma Richmond, Twylla Cunningham and Campbell Killick*

Summary: Human trafficking and modern slavery remain an evolving research topic because of the complex and 'illicit' nature of this type of offending, which relies primarily on victim compliance to avoid detection. Worldwide, the exact number of victims of human trafficking is unknown because of the 'hidden' profile of such criminal activity. The International Labour Organisation (2017) estimated that worldwide, on any day in 2016, there were 40 million victims of modern slavery. This is likely a significant under-representation due to the implicit need for secrecy and for victims to be 'hidden', sometimes in 'plain sight', from the local communities within which they are being 'held' by the perpetrators. The focus of this study was to develop a profile of perpetrators within Northern Ireland and to explore coercive control tactics to inform assessment of risk and the development of appropriate offence-focused intervention(s). This paper explores key themes that were identified through the completion of a retrospective content analysis of case files accessed through the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI)'s case management system. An audit tool was created, which supported identification of three key themes: perpetrator perspective, victim vulnerabilities, and coercion/control tactics. The information collated from the case files supports the creation of evidence-based training to develop practitioner skills in assessing risks associated with this type of offending, succinct analysis within court reports, and creation of tailored interventions to engage service-users who have been convicted of human-trafficking offences. This study has also identified themes which will aid in the potential creation of specific programmes of work with service-users, with the focus on reducing the creation of further victims from this type of offending.

Keywords: Human trafficking, modern slavery, perpetrator, victims, exploitation, coercion, criminogenic, practitioner, interventions.

* Emma Richmond is a Senior Trainer, PBNI (email: Emma.Richmond@probation-ni.gov.uk). Dr Twylla Cunningham is Principal Psychologist, PBNI (email: Twylla.Cunningham@probation-ni.gov.uk). Dr Campbell Killick is a lecturer in social work at Ulster University (email: c.killick@ulster.ac.uk).

Introduction

Prior to the year 2000, there were ambiguities in international and domestic legislation concerning the distinction between victims of trafficking and victims of smuggling. This was the focus of a United Nations (UN) Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (2004). The Convention's first steps to address this on a global scale were the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (commonly referred to as the Palermo Protocol). The protocol, adopted in 2000, provided clear identification of what would constitute an offence of human trafficking; it specifies that 'the threat or use of force or deception is a necessary component of trafficking persons into any situation' (Ditmore, 2011, p. 115).

In the UK, referrals for identified or potential victims of human trafficking/modern slavery take the form of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). During 2021, there were 12,727 referrals made to the Home Office of potential victims of modern slavery. This was a 20 per cent increase on the previous year (Home Office, 2022). The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) set up a Human Trafficking Branch in 2015, and between 2019 and 2021, there were 76 recorded cases of modern slavery identified (PSNI Statistics Branch, 2021). Again, the actual figures are likely to be significantly higher than those reported.

Research into human trafficking has been primarily informed using interviews with victims and focused on understanding the phases of recruitment and entrapment of victims. This often involves the use of violence, threats of violence, threats to family members and focusing on vulnerable victims who are seeking support or help. To date, there have been no studies in the UK from a perpetrator's perspective. There have been a few international projects, most notably Gotch (2016), Viuhko (2019) and Serie *et al.* (2018). The evidenced gap in the literature, with the aforementioned increase in detection, identifies the need for further research to be conducted in this area. Furthermore, there is evidence of a need to explore the links between domestic-violence theory and human trafficking/modern slavery. Verhoeven *et al.* (2013) posit that the entrapment and control of victims is based on a number of interactions which culminate in violence becoming a prominent factor. They also suggest that there is an inherent power imbalance that must be maintained to ensure that the victim does not leave the abusive situation in which they are controlled. Limited research has been completed with individuals who have committed offences relating to human

trafficking/modern slavery. An enhanced understanding of the criminogenic needs of perpetrators is required.

Methodology

This research project was conducted utilising qualitative methods, as it sought 'to understand the *phenomena*, not to quantify them' (Green and Thorogood, 2018, p. 9). Specifically, a retrospective content analysis was conducted on information-rich case files. This research project utilised an 'abductive' approach (Charmaz, 2012), which identifies that coding is progressed through a cyclical grounded-theory approach of collecting data, analysing it and developing a provisional code to suggest further sampling and analysis until 'saturation' is achieved (Green and Thorogood, 2018). A strength of this methodology is that it does not risk altering the perpetrators' 'telling' of their involvement in the offence or risk re-victimisation (where the perpetrator is also victim).

Design

Identifying case files

The case files included individuals in custody and in the community, and files that were no longer active cases but had not been closed under the retention-and-disposal schedule (this process ensures that records within PBNI are retained for only as long as statute allows, and when no longer needed are disposed of in a timely manner). Files were identified through relevant offence codes on the case-management system. Furthermore, this classifying of coding ensured that the files were chosen as having the relevant experiences and characteristics to satisfy the objectives of this research project. The relevant legislation utilised by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) for progressing charges to court is the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland), 2015. However, due to the complexity of this type of offending, the codes identified were also from other relevant legislation, such as sexual exploitation, brothel keeping, financial offending and gang-master offences. Case files involving immigration violations that did not constitute trafficking were excluded. It is recognised that it was difficult to identify the extent to which coercion was used, and this further accentuates the complexity of this type of offending.

Inclusion criteria

Files were deemed eligible for inclusion if they met the following criteria:

- Perpetrators, over the age of 18 years, sentenced in a Northern Irish court within the last ten years
- Offence to be related to human trafficking and/or modern slavery offences – evidenced exploitation
- Victim files (sentenced in relation to separate offending behaviour), if there was clear identification within the PBNI case files, depositions, structured outline of cases, or from National Referral Mechanism documentation that the individual was a victim of human trafficking.

Exclusion criteria

Files were excluded if they involved a perpetrator under the age of 18 years, not sentenced for a human trafficking and/or modern slavery offence, and not a victim of human trafficking/modern slavery. Files on any immigration violations other than trafficking were also excluded, as were those of individuals sentenced outside the jurisdiction and files that had been closed on the PBNI database due to either the formal supervision element no longer being active or there being no community supervision post sentence at court.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was utilised in this research study. Through this form of sampling, the resulting identified source data cannot be viewed as representative of all cases of human trafficking within the local jurisdiction, but rather are representative of the available cases – having applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This form of sampling is particularly suited to content analysis as it assumes that the analyst knows the population of interest and how to access the relevant information. Only identified files were accessed for data processing – complying with the General Data Protection Regulations (Data Protection Act, 2018) policy, including source data access regulations from both the PBNI and the University of Ulster standards.

Data collection was guided by an audit tool based on themes from a literature review. The review identified four dominant themes:

- Trafficker characteristics and demographics
- Entrapment/recruitment

- Coercion/control
- Domestic violence.

An identified strength of content analysis was the ability to incorporate changes to the audit tool as it was used on files, to ensure that the identified concept themes were accurately focused and reduced the large amount of data that were available in most files. The audit tool for this project was amended on three occasions and each version saved, with the reasoning for these changes, to bolster the integrity of the study.

Ethical considerations

As this study was not completed directly with perpetrator or victim, consent for data collection was sought from the PBNI. At every initial assessment interview with service-users, they were informed of the usage of their data and its compliance with GDPR (Data Protection Act, 2018) and previously the Data Protection Act (1998). Approval for this study was obtained from PBNI Research Committee and the University of Ulster Research Ethics Filter Committee in the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences. This research study was not conducted directly with service-users; therefore, it did not require regional ethical committee approval through the Office for Research Ethics Committees Northern Ireland (ORECNI).

Each file that was included in the study was assigned an alphabetic symbol in sequential order. Any quotes disseminated from case files are included without any identifying personal data, to ensure that anonymity of both perpetrators and victims was maintained. This is particularly important to ensure that there is no risk of re-victimisation of the victims in each case.

Findings

Within the identified sample, there were 13 individual files chosen, which met the inclusion criteria. They were further refined as ten distinct offences – with three cases having additional individual co-accused. The identified case files consisted of nine males and four females. The perpetrators (seven males) were aged between 20 and 64 years, with most between 30 and 34 years of age. Within the study, the three identified female perpetrators were between 20 and 55 years of age. As noted within the paper, human trafficking is a complex type of offending, and it was identified that within the 13 case files, there were individuals who had been prosecuted for the offence of human

trafficking, but it was evident through examination of the case that they had initially been victims of this type of offence before transitioning to engaging in the offending behaviours. In such cases, there is discussion in the paper regarding the overlap between being a victim and being a perpetrator. After exhaustive searching of the PBNi electronic case-management system, these have been identified as the total number of available files within a ten-year time frame, and all were victims of forced-labour trafficking or sexual trafficking.

To facilitate the exploration of coercion and control in relation to this type of offending, thematic analysis was completed through refinement of the *a priori* design of the audit tool. Three dominant themes were identified:

- Perpetrators' self-reporting of offence(s)
- Victim-specific information
- Coercion and/or control.

Theme 1: Perpetrator perspective

Within the case files for those perpetrators who had moved to reside in the jurisdiction, this was identified in all cases as being for financial gain or a better way of life. None of the perpetrators within the depositions or initial assessment interviews admitted fully before the court their involvement in the charges – there were varying degrees of minimisation. Those perpetrators who admitted to having been involved in sexual trafficking refuted any involvement in controlling the victims to engage in prostitution for financial gain. A number of perpetrators explained their role as being more benign, focusing on how they had supported the victims to attend at 'appointments' with clients or attend at work placement for a small financial fee.

Perpetrators asserted that the victims were 'willing participants'. One perpetrator stated that he had become involved in supporting the victims to travel to the jurisdiction for the purpose of working in prostitution, but he was adamant in interview that the females were willing to engage in these activities.

When it came to reported financial gain, there was evident minimisation of the role of the perpetrator regarding financial remuneration at the levels disclosed in the depositions. Within this context, there was often discussion by the perpetrators of viewing themselves as a support network to the victims' 'daily life'. Many viewed themselves as victims of a situation in which

they had tried to be 'helpful' to the victims, with one perpetrator making comment that he 'did not realise the case would be blown out of proportion and cause my family so much trouble'.

Victims were recruited through three main methods: financial incentivising, threats towards family members, and abuse of a personal relationship. The first of these relates to a promise of improved financial stability, which was through provision of a work placement for which wages were to be earned. Contact was initiated in a different jurisdiction – often the country of origin of the victim – and they moved from or were transported to Northern Ireland. From the case files, this method of recruitment for financial gain was predominately for victims unknown to the perpetrators. Those victims who owed debts were aware of why they were moving location but not the purpose or type of employment to which they would be subjected.

The second identified method of recruitment was the use of threats towards family members in the event of failure to engage with the work placement. These threats were issued against immediate family members, warning that physical violence would be utilised against them or causing the victim to be seen as 'disgraced' in their local community. The perpetrators were unknown to the victims prior to the threats being made.

The third identified method of recruitment was through abuse of a personal relationship. This entailed the perpetrator being in a romantic relationship with the victim(s), or abuse of trust through exploitation of the victim's vulnerabilities, with particular reference to cognitive impairments. This type of recruitment was linked to extended periods of the victim being subjected to what is assessed as modern slavery, and also linked to lower rates of the victim perceiving themselves as being victimised. This extended period of slavery increased the likelihood of the victim becoming a perpetrator of similar offending because, over a protracted period of time, they came to rationalise the offending behaviour they had experienced.

In all but one file, the perpetrators who were in romantic relationships with the victims denied that they had been involved in coercing the victim to engage in abusive situations. There was denial of controlling finances or behaviours, with some reflection by the perpetrator proffering counter-allegation of the victim's reported violent behaviours. This assertion of supporting the victims was also reflected within files when the victim was a family member or known through family connections.

Within this sample, the perpetrators who are also assessed as victims of human trafficking/modern slavery were all female. The common theme

between the three females was feeling controlled in the situation due to a sense of loyalty to a family member or partner. The loyalty varied between wishing to support their partner's debt repayments, not wishing to leave a family member in an abusive situation, and being a long-term victim themselves of significant abuse. The control and engendered fear of their co-accused was evident and profound – within two files, offending occurred over a significant number of years.

Theme 2: Victim vulnerabilities

It was not explicit in all files whether there were vulnerabilities identified relating to victims. For those files where this information was available, it was derived from depositions, psychiatric reports or Risk Management Meeting (RMM) notes, with victim-impact information provided by the local PSNI representative in attendance at RMMs.

Identified vulnerabilities were:

- Assessed learning disability
- Experiences of previous abuse (sexual)
- Adverse childhood experiences
- Limited or no education and literacy concerns
- Poverty in home country
- Controlling or domestic-abuse behaviours in current relationship with perpetrator
- Illegal immigration status within the jurisdiction.

An example of how the victim's vulnerabilities were exploited was noted in one file, with the perpetrator being described as 'overall a controlling figure which she kept returning to because of her needs for someone to look after her that she loved'.

Transportation internationally for victims to the jurisdiction was either by plane or ferry. Within six files, there was clear evidence that the perpetrator had facilitated the travel of the victim. This was through organising plane or ferry travel tickets, travelling physically with the victim on planes, and meeting a bus on disembarkation from a ferry. As regards human trafficking domestically, within seven files, this was evidenced through transportation of the victim by picking them up at airports and bringing them to their provided accommodation.

Work placements were separated into two types – forced labour (three files) or sexual trafficking (ten files). In the case of victims who were subjected to forced labour, this was within the context of bonded labour – where the victim owed a debt and was attempting to repay this before they could make money for themselves. The more ‘formal’ work placements identified were within factories, agricultural placement and local, smaller, independent businesses. Placements that were more ‘informal’ included assisting with money laundering, hiring accommodation that was used for prostitution, repackaging drugs, and receiving and transporting parcels to an agreed location. Victims were working up to twelve hours a day, seven days per week.

With regard to sexual exploitation for financial gain, the victims in the placements were detailed, as ‘out-working’ only. This meant that the victims never met ‘clients’ at their own accommodation but always at an agreed location, which was usually a hotel room or short-term lease on a serviced flat. One victim was also forced to engage in sexual activities recorded or streamed live via online websites. The victims were all female and were residing in accommodation provided to them by the perpetrator(s), with some moved regularly between addresses.

Victim statements were not present in most files, and the information regarding their reported feelings is primarily from depositions. This is not uncommon in such case files because of difficulties in meeting victims to complete a victim-impact statement due to their having left the jurisdiction and returned to their country of origin. Control of the victims and feelings of being trapped were engendered through multiple methods, such as through threats of violence or reprisals should they leave ‘placement’. Being isolated and alone left many victims feeling disempowered from seeking help from anyone if they were out with a perpetrator – this is echoed by a number of victims in the case files.

Theme 3: Coercion and/or control

There was significant evidence of the use of coercion and/or control tactics against victims, including:

- Use of control of needs and physical environment of the victims
- Psychological control tactics
- Monopolisation of victim vulnerabilities
- Financial control

- Perpetrators' distortion of their role
- Inherent impact of trauma.

There were only three files where the perpetrator did not benefit financially from the exploitation of the victim(s). In the remainder of the files, there was clear evidence of substantial financial gain by the perpetrators. The amount of financial gain ranged between £6,000 and £120,000. The perpetrators in four of the files stated that they owed money in the form of debts, which were noted as being relating to gambling addiction, failed business in country of origin, or paying off debts for their romantic partner. The victims in 11 of the 13 case files noted that they owed financial debts.

Physical violence was evident in files as a method of ensuring compliance – both actual violence and fear of violent reprisals for non-compliance. Control of victims was also noted in two files as being related to significant periods of domestic abuse in the relationship, which was both physical and verbal. Often, victims had fear engendered in them through the perpetrators exploiting their lack of English-language skills, illegal immigration status and limited understanding of the local culture in the jurisdiction. Those who occasionally had their passport returned, to engage in ongoing controlled activities, reported being too fearful to try to escape, and so returned their identification as soon as it had been used for the purpose directed by the perpetrator. A number of victims stated that they were told not to speak to anyone outside of the house about their work placements, and warned that if they did leave their accommodation, they would likely be arrested by the police. Victims were also warned that local residents would be hostile towards them. Use of derogatory and degrading controlling language was noted within the files on a number of occasions. This use of language was also noted as a control tactic in engendering fear of violence towards the victim's family in the case of any 'perceived non-conformity' with the perpetrators' 'instructions', and consequently ensured compliance through blackmailing the victims.

Use of illegal substances was noted in two of the files, with one of the victims stating that drugs had been forced into her mouth and up her nose as she struggled while engaging in sexual activities with 'clients'. The other victim noted that she had been incapacitated through the administering of drugs, and after she was rescued indicated feelings of 'hating' coming out of the drug 'haze'. Having control of the victims' physical environment meant that the perpetrators had complete control of their basic needs and personal care. The neglect of these needs was evident as another method of ensuring the

victims' reliance on the perpetrators for their accommodation, so that they could not leave. During one two-week period, the victims in a placement had no access to toilet roll or basic hygiene provisions. A number of victims in the case files had lost significant weight during their trafficking experience, with one being diagnosed as malnourished and having lost most of their teeth.

Discussion

Human trafficking and modern slavery remains an evolving research topic. Whilst there is a wealth of information within academia relating to victims' experiences of trafficking and programmes to support recovery, there is also a gap in research relating to the perpetrators of this type of offending behaviour – specifically from the point of view of the perpetrator, and focusing on their actions in the offences. This project sought to explore what is known about this type of offending, with particular focus on coercion and/or control, to inform practice within PBNI. Limitations of this study were identified initially due to the nature of the material utilised, highlighting potential bias in the data information sources as they were created by the PSNI with the purpose of supporting conviction at court and initial assessment – thus requiring the researcher specifically to 'filter' information. Sampling for this project was completed purposively, which naturally has implications for researcher bias and bias in choice of cases. To attempt to redress this potential bias, searching of the PBNI database was completed for all known human-trafficking offence codes as defined by the local legislation. The size of this sample, whilst it reached saturation, is small but representative of the population known within the PBNI at the time of the content analysis.

Gotch (2016, p. 107) identified that any professionals working with this perpetrator group within a domestic trafficking setting, should also seek to have an understanding of 'sexual-offense-specific research, domestic violence research, the impact of adverse childhood experiences, the criminal subculture, human trafficking in general and the sex industry'. Social workers in the PBNI will have first contact with perpetrators at initial court report assessment stage; thus, understanding the offending behaviour, methods of coercion and/or control and victim impact will enhance tuning in to the interview – specifically, the questioning styles to be utilised and formation of probing questions to elicit information to inform assessment. As is integral within the social work process, comprehensive assessments are the cornerstone of formulation, which leads to the development of well-informed

and tailored case plans that address identified criminogenic needs and reduce likelihood of recidivism and creation of further victims.

The Palermo Protocol formed the basis of an internationally agreed definition of trafficking as revolving ‘around three separate elements: the action (“recruitment, transportation, harbouring or receipt of persons”); second, the means; and finally, the purpose of exploitation’ (Vijayarasa, 2016, p. 5). All three must be present for an offence to be deemed to be ‘trafficking’ in its truest sense, succinctly articulated by Keane (2019), who also proffers an insightful reflection on the complexity of this type of offending, with reference to the distinct difference from human smuggling. This is the first point of understanding for this type of offending and pertinent for practitioners to understand, as it is the distinction between an offence of trafficking and modern slavery. The two concepts are often used interchangeably within literature, as both usually occur simultaneously. However, it is arguably insightful for practitioners who are engaging with perpetrators of these types of offending to understand the distinction clearly.

Abraham Maslow published an essay in July 1943 in which he explored a theory for human motivation; he discussed a linear list of needs to which individuals respond in everyday life. This has become more frequently known as the ‘hierarchy of needs’. The first and most basic fundamental need is ‘physiological’ – food, oxygen and water, without which a human being would die. Next is ‘safety’ – accommodation and safety from danger. Maslow expounds that both are essential needs in which humans strive to achieve stability before any consideration can be directed towards achieving the ensuing three needs: ‘A man, in this state, if it is extreme enough and chronic enough, may be characterised as living almost for safety alone’ (Maslow, 1943 p. 376). The relevance of this theory for practitioners is evident through findings in this project that victims were made wholly reliant on the perpetrators in many instances by the interference with their access to fulfil these essential ‘core’ needs. Depriving victims of these basic needs ensured that they were focused solely on meeting them. This type of control exerted by perpetrators is premeditated and focused on dominating the lives of the victims. This further enhances the inherent power imbalance in the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. The perpetrators have ensured that this power vacuum exists and, as such, negates the victims’ ability to make decisions as regards trying to improve their living situation.

When considering type and methods of coercion, exploration of this concept should, arguably, begin with the work of Albert Biderman (1957, cited

by Baldwin *et al.*, 2015). He explored how prisoners were manipulated into providing false confessions without the use of physical violence. He posited a total of eight methods that were used as coercive techniques, which included the use of isolation, increased dependency upon the abuser, induced exhaustion, degradation, enforcing trivial demands, demonstration of omnipotence, perception distortion and alternating between engaging and aggressive behaviours (Baldwin *et al.*, 2015; Dando *et al.*, 2016). This concept of using coercive tactics without the use of violence was also identified by Petrunov (2014) who notes that within a sample of 92 respondents, 75 per cent stated that they had not been a victim of physical coercion. Within the sample findings in this project, whilst there was note of some use of physical violence, the majority of victims indicated that they had been controlled by non-physical coercive tactics. 'Indeed, captivity does not always require locked doors or "chains", but rather, rests on the psychological entrapment induced by these abusive strategies' (Doychak and Raghavan, 2018, p. 2). This adds to the complexity of this type of offending and further highlights the incumbent need for practitioners to understand these types of coercive control.

The findings of this project echo a number of findings identified within research of the use of financial constraints to control victims, whether this is through debt bonds or garnering all wages that were earned 'legitimately' (Jones *et al.*, 2011; Petrunov, 2014; Reid, 2016; Preble, 2019). Furthermore, the victims identified in this project were all the same nationality as the perpetrators. This is hypothesised as aiding in the control of the victims through isolation via the language barrier in the local jurisdiction, their documents having been removed as part of their travel arrangements.

One pertinent, albeit distorted, perception of the relationships, which was a dominant theme in this project, was that of 'helping' the victim, through taking them physically to appointments and work placements or providing them with practical support, such as cashing cheques. This method of minimisation is particularly important for practitioners to reflect upon and challenge when completing initial assessments, ensuring that written reports negate victim blaming and that this has been explored through purposeful questioning, with focus on developing discrepancies between what the perpetrator is reporting as regards 'voluntary compliance' of the victim. Ensuring that it is succinctly reflected within the offence analysis of an initial assessment report will also aid defensibility of assessment should this be questioned during the court process or potentially by parole commissioners if a period of statutory licence supervision is being considered or has been imposed.

As professionals working with this type of service-user, it is incumbent on practitioners to understand how the service-user may have transitioned from victim to perpetrator. Within the case files, there was evidence of what is described in trauma literature as trauma-bonding. Raghavan and Doychak (2015) proffered the theory that the appropriate phraseology for such trauma is coerced attachment rather than bonding, with specific reference to sex trafficking. It is described as a 'dynamic, cyclical state', where there is a significant shift in the victims' internal reality and essentially a violation of their 'moral integrity' (Herman, 1998; Raghavan and Doychak, 2015).

Conceivably, a coercive-control framework can help professionals working with the victim-perpetrator typology to understand that 'successive coercive control creates an environment of fear, dread and obedience even in the absence of physical violence' (Raghavan and Doychak, 2015, p. 584). This understanding of limited use of violence will develop practitioners' understanding of how the perpetrators have ensured compliance of the victim. It will also help practitioners to engage in reflective preparation whilst tuning into engaging with the victim-perpetrator from a position of unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1951).

The dependency created by both labour and sex trafficking arguably creates and compounds the experienced trauma of the victims. Experienced trauma(s) has previously been identified in the findings as something that the perpetrators were likely aware of and furthermore monopolised on, to ensure compliance. Trauma will impact on every aspect of a victim's psychological functioning, and it robs a person of a 'sense of power and control over her own life' (Herman, 1998, p. 98). Herman (1998) also posits, in support of Maslow's assertions, that the first and central stage of recovery through a therapeutic relationship is *establishing safety*. She proposes that this must take precedence over any other stage of support and recovery for the victim, which becomes more difficult to achieve in certain circumstances, namely:

- The longer the person has been abused
- The severity of the abuse
- The age of onset – particularly if the victim is younger in age.

Conclusion

This research has clearly identified that, within a local context, the predicating factors that make victims vulnerable to trafficking and slavery share similar

characteristics to trafficking worldwide. The current COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on financial stability and resulted in loss of earnings for many people, which has potentially increased this type of acquisitive offending by heightening traffickers' access to victims in financial distress. There is currently increased concern that, as a result of the war in Ukraine, refugees are being targeted by traffickers in different countries within Europe, because of their evident vulnerabilities.

This research project identified overwhelmingly that, in interview, perpetrators minimised or denied their offending behaviour. In the majority of cases, the perpetrators were skilled at identifying the vulnerabilities of the victims and exploiting these for their financial benefit. Placements were identified as both forced labour and sexual exploitation, with debt bonds often identified as a control method to ensure compliance. Victims were subjected to both physical and psychological forms of control, which lasted in duration between months and years. The coercion was through multiple methods, including abuse of an intimate partner relationship; threats to harm the victim or their family; concern about being disgraced in their country of origin; increasing accrued debt; and no access to their identification documents should they wish to leave the trafficking situation.

This project established themes that will improve evidence-based practice amongst criminal justice sector employees who are working with perpetrators of this type of offending, both in the community and within custodial settings. There is clear and identifiable merit in ensuring multidisciplinary meetings to inform information-gathering and tuning in to first interviews or programmes of work. There is supporting evidence that practitioners should also tune in to such interviews from a more collaborative perspective within PBNI, ensuring that input is sought from a forensic psychologist. It is important that the practitioner approaches the interview from the most informed perspective with regard to challenging offending behaviour, developing discrepancies, and focusing on securing as much information as possible from the interviews, to inform the assessment and report for court.

The information garnered from case files also proffers practical support to case managers, to have professional curiosity to ensure understanding of the forms of coercive control that have been utilised. This will inform a bespoke programme of work with the perpetrator to address the identified criminogenic needs. To prevent recidivism, practitioners need to seek to understand the behaviours in which the perpetrator has engaged, which will include understanding their social histories and any adverse childhood

experiences. This is particularly pertinent for cases of victim-perpetrator overlap.

The current research project is timely in light of the recently passed Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland), 2021. This legislation has striven to develop and change the current domestic abuse legislation to include coercive or controlling behaviour. As is noted in this research project, practitioners need to understand what coercion and control entail, within both a domestic abuse and a trafficking setting. This also highlights a focus on further reflection on the use of domestic-abuse assessment tools when completing reports where the trafficker has been in a romantic relationship with the victim.

This is the first project of this type within the local Northern Ireland jurisdiction and provides a beneficial contribution to the knowledge base regarding evidence-informed practice for social workers. As the cases of human trafficking/modern slavery continue to rise, there is evidenced merit in investing further in research of this topic within the local jurisdiction. Should there be capacity for further primary qualitative research in this field, a more collaborative project with other agencies would facilitate increasing the knowledge base for practitioners in both the public and voluntary sectors. Furthermore, this would support creation of a bespoke assessment tool for human trafficking/modern slavery offences, to supplement the current ACE assessment tool within PBNI. This would aid the formation of informed case plans to address offending behaviour, focusing on reducing recidivism and the further creation of victims, and promoting safer communities.

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Legislative instruments

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