



Professionals' Knowledge and Perceptions on Child Trafficking: Evidence from Portugal

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Abstract

Children who have been trafficked may experience longer-term mental health consequences with a significant impact on all life domains. Key professionals must be prepared and adopt practices that help to prevent and fight child trafficking and the harm caused. This study aims to explore the current knowledge of professionals from Portugal on child trafficking and perceptions about their practices and skills. The sample consisted of 614 professionals from justice (47.1%), education (19.4%), social (18.9%), and health care (14.7%) areas who completed an online survey. Professionals were more knowledgeable about forms of exploitation and less about victims' profile. Professionals who had direct contact with and/or training in human trafficking presented more knowledge and positive perceptions about their practices and skills. This study aims to raise awareness and develop informed training programs based on professionals' needs and challenges.

Keywords Child trafficking · Professionals · Knowledge · Perceptions

Introduction

Child trafficking is defined by the Palermo Protocol as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation”, regardless of the use of abusive means of control, such as the use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, and fraud (United Nations — UN, 2000, p. 2). Child trafficking is a phenomenon with worldwide impact, and it is estimated to affect thousands of girls and boys every year (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime — UNODC, 2021). Despite the development and implementation of policies, guidelines, and action plans from national and international organisations (e.g. Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings — GRETA, 2017; Palermo Protocol — UN, 2000), child trafficking remains a hidden reality (UNODC, 2021).

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Victims of child trafficking may present a previous history of violence which contributes to their vulnerability, to victimisation, and deterioration of their physical and mental health (Zimmerman et al., 2003). A study developed with 29 young people trafficked into the UK found experiences of physical and sexual abuse before the trafficking occurred (Stanley et al., 2016). The literature shows that during the trafficking experience, children are subjected to conditions of extreme violence and abuse (Zimmerman et al., 2003). Stanley et al. (2016) verified that child victims (both genders) had experienced violence and threats (physical, sexual, psychological), restrictions of liberty (e.g. confined in a locked room), deprivation (e.g. lacked sufficient food and/or water), and were forced to consume alcohol, drugs, and/or medication. Young people who have suffered from poly-victimisation are at increased risk for psychopathology and problematic behaviours (Ford et al., 2011). Rafferty (2008) stated that child trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation present severe risks to the physical, psychological, spiritual, and socioemotional development of young victims. Research indicates that child trafficking and multiple trauma exposure are associated with complex post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms (Ottisova et al., 2018).

The Pivotal Role of Professionals

Considering the great vulnerability lived by child trafficking victims, key professionals must adopt a proactive and attentive attitude regarding the different opportunities for action throughout the process of trafficking (Zimmerman et al., 2003). The impact suffered by child victims and their vulnerability reinforces the need for adequate intervention by health care professionals in identification, care, and support (Greenbaum, 2017; United Nations Children's Fund — UNICEF, 2006; Stanley et al., 2016).

An important group of professionals that can make a difference is law enforcement. It becomes difficult to arrest and prosecute traffickers without an adequate investigation and identification of trafficking cases (Farrell et al., 2015). Matos et al. (2019) noted that human trafficking still presents a low level of prosecutions and convictions. Furthermore, legal aid and legal assistance must be present when responding to the victim's needs, its access is imperative to promote autonomy and empowerment in victims of child trafficking (UNODC, 2013). It is inevitable that these children have contact with the judicial system. Therefore, justice professionals must adopt a child-friendly justice approach (Council of Europe, 2011), preventing children from being subjected to more violence, guilt, or held accountable for the situation of exploitation (Martinho et al., 2020). Portuguese law classifies children as victims of special vulnerability (Victim Statute — Law no. 130/2015, September 4), which constitutes a series of rights conforming with the guidelines on child-friendly justice (Council of Europe, 2011).

Professionals from the social area are present in all phases of protection of trafficking victims: prevention (Rafferty, 2008), victim identification, guardian assignment, care, and protection (UNICEF, 2006), psychological support (Mitchels, 2004), accompanying the children to court (Law no. 130/2015, September 4), (re)integration (UNICEF, 2006), and influencing social policies (Rafferty, 2008).

Education professionals should be involved in this work with children at risk and victims of child trafficking. These professionals may have to refer situations where they suspect that the child is exploited or is at risk of being trafficked (UNICEF, 2006). Moreover, to better protect potential victims, educational programs must include anti-trafficking measures (UNODC, 2018).

Appropriate professional practices focused on the children's best interests must integrate a culturally sensitive posture, trauma-informed and victim-centred approach (Martinho et al., 2020). These characteristics should be transversal to all professional groups (justice, social and protection, health care, and education) since they prevent the increase of the impact and secondary victimisation (Martinho et al., 2020). Another component for proper practice is the ongoing and appropriate preparation and training of professionals, especially professional competencies and child trafficking idiosyncrasies (Martinho et al., 2020). Furthermore, a multidisciplinary and cooperative network among professionals should always be present (Martinho et al., 2020).

The Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) helps understand the major role played by the surrounding environment in the prevention and combat of child trafficking since it allows to recognise the complex multifaceted nature of this phenomenon (Barner et al., 2017). This model focuses not only on the perpetrator/victim relationship but also on the variables that enhance the empowerment of individuals (Barner et al., 2017). So, prevention strategies and interventions can be adjusted to the different contextual factors of each victim to better answer their needs and fit their reality (Barner et al., 2017). Based on the Ecological Model, Barner et al. (2017) developed the five-sphere ecological frame specifically for anti-trafficking interventions and their influence on the victim: (1) person, family, and environment (e.g. psychosocial services, family support groups); (2) habitats, networks, and niches (e.g. public information campaigns); (3) power and privilege (e.g. gender relations, sexual and romantic relationships, and child-rearing); (4) stress and resilience (e.g. health, mental health, wellness, and economic relations); and (5) the life course (e.g. gender and age-based public information efforts).

Child Trafficking in Portugal

In recent years, in Portugal, the Observatory on Trafficking in Human Beings established a progressive increase in the number of registered cases of child trafficking (GRETA, 2020). Between 2016 and 2018, were registered 74 alleged victims of child trafficking, with 32 confirmed victims. From the alleged victims, the majority were female ($n=51$) and foreigner ($n=68$). Portugal is especially a transit country regarding child trafficking situations ($n=41$; GRETA, 2020).

Since 2007, Portugal has implemented four national plans to prevent and combat trafficking in human beings (NPPCTHB), seeking the latest "to reinforce knowledge on the subject of trafficking in human beings, to ensure that victims have better access to their rights, as well as to qualify intervention, and to promote the fight against organized crime networks..." (4th NPPCTHB 2018–2021; Resolution of the Council of Ministers no. 80/2018, p. 2546). In recent years, there has been an investment in the dissemination of good quality information and in the education and training of different professionals who can have direct contact with human trafficking (e.g. police officers, labour inspectors, social workers, and health professionals; Resolution of the Council of Ministers No. 80/2018). In 2021, it was published the Protocol with procedures for prevention, identification, and protection of child victims of human trafficking, from which training actions will be developed (Observatory on Trafficking in Human Beings, 2021).

Despite the political and institutional attention and the progress made in scientific research, there is much to do regarding the role of the different professionals who focus on child trafficking (e.g. Stanley et al., 2016). We can find some studies that seek to understand the perceptions and knowledge of human trafficking in university students (e.g. Gonçalves

et al., 2019) and with social and judicial professionals who work in human trafficking in general (e.g. Cunha et al., 2019). However, in Portugal, empirical research is practically non-existent regarding child trafficking and more specifically professionals' knowledge and perceptions of this reality. Thus, the present study represents a starting point for the development of knowledge on child trafficking in Portugal.

The existing literature indicates that professionals' knowledge (Greenbaum, 2017), personal beliefs (Leopardi et al., 2020), and attitudes (Stanley et al., 2016) towards child trafficking can influence their professional practice. As such, it makes sense to look at the concept of child trafficking as a social construct, that is fluid and dynamic, created from the interaction of individuals in their encounters (Gergen & Gergen, 2012, as cited in Galbin, 2014), which will influence how professionals understand and interact with it.

Objective and Hypotheses

This study aims to explore the current knowledge of Portuguese professionals (justice, health care, social, and education) on child trafficking and professionals' perceptions about their practices and skills. Considering this study objectives, the following hypotheses were developed: H1: Professionals with higher knowledge levels have more positive perceptions of their practices and skills; H2: Sociodemographic factors (e.g. age, educational level) influence child trafficking knowledge and professionals' perceptions about their practices and skills; H3: More years of professional experience influence child trafficking knowledge and professionals' perceptions about their practices and skills; H4: Having previous contact with victims influences professionals child trafficking knowledge and their perceptions of their practices and skills; H5: Professionals who have specific training in this area exhibit higher levels of child trafficking knowledge and more positive perceptions about their practices and skills; H6: Professionals with formal or informal awareness revealed higher levels of knowledge in child trafficking and more positive perceptions about their practices and skills.

Methods

Measures

For data collection, the instrument used was "Child Trafficking Survey for Professionals", created from a pre-existing instrument on human trafficking (remove for review). The items were constructed based on an extensive literature review of empirical studies and national and international reports on child trafficking. The present study is an exploratory design, developed to fill a gap regarding the lack of specialised tools for assessing child trafficking knowledge and professionals' perceptions within different professional groups in Portugal.

The survey consisted of four parts. The first evaluates the sociodemographic characteristics (age, sex, marital status, nationality, residence area, perceived socioeconomic level, educational level, and current professional status), and professional experience (professional group, current occupation, years on the current position, contact/work with victims of human trafficking globally, and child trafficking specifically). The second part aims to know the type of contact professionals have with the subject of child trafficking, whether if it was a formal contact (e.g. professionally) or informal (e.g. reading about it); if they

had specific training in this area, the duration of the training; and knowledge of an action protocol for referring victims of human trafficking in their workplace. The third part contains 32 items about child trafficking, in which the participants positioned themselves about each one based on a Likert scale of five points (1 — Totally disagree, 2 — Disagree, 3 — Neither disagree nor agree, 4 — Agree, 5 — Totally agree). This item response scale was recoded into “Correct” and “Incorrect”. The answers “Totally disagree”, “Disagree”, and “Neither disagree nor agree” were considered “Incorrect” and the answers “Agree” and “Totally agree” were considered “Correct”, considering the current scientific research and national/international reports. Some items were quoted inversely to calculate the total score and score per area (see Table 4). Each correct answer was worth one point, and each incorrect answer was zero points; therefore, the total score could range from zero to 32. Based on the literature, the items were organised into areas of knowledge: (1) risk/vulnerability factors (zero to six points); (2) dynamics of child trafficking (zero to six points); (3) forms of exploitation (zero to seven points); (4) victims' profile (zero to six points); (5) traffickers' profile (zero to three points); (6) child trafficking in Portugal (zero to four points). The survey had adequate internal consistency ($\alpha=0.72$). The final part had seven items about perceptions of professionals' practices and skills on child trafficking. As in the previous section, the participants had to position themselves on a Likert scale of five points (1 — Totally disagree, 2 — Disagree, 3 — Neither disagree nor agree, 4 — Agree, 5 — Totally agree). The total score could vary between seven and 35 because each item varies between one and five points. To standardise and better compare the results, the average total score of the knowledge survey, the different areas of knowledge, and the total of the perceptions survey were calculated, so that the values varied between one and five.

Procedures

The survey was subjected to a spoken reflection with four participants to test its suitability. After making the changes resulting from this reflection, the survey was disseminated online, through eSurvey Creator, to cover a larger geographical area. The Superior Council of Justice, the Attorney General's Office, the National Directorate of the Judicial Police, the National Directorate of the Foreigners and Borders Service, public and private hospitals, health centres, and different networks of organisations were contacted to disseminate the instrument. To collect data, the survey was also disseminated in different social networks, institutional e-mails, and online forums. The snowball sampling technique was applied to be able to collect a larger sample from different professional groups. Data collection was carried out between March and October 2019. It was not possible to assess the number of people reached by the survey, so the percentage of participation was not calculated. The participants had access to the informed consent before completing the survey, which contained a brief framework and objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality during data collection and analysis. Additionally, an email was made available if the participants wanted to reach the research team. The instrument took approximately 15 min to complete. Lastly, this study was approved by the Ethics Subcommittee for Social and Human Sciences of the Ethics Committee of University of Minho.

Data Analysis

The sample size was calculated considering the statistical power of analyses to be performed, using the G* Power 3 software, considering an alpha of 0.05 and power of 0.95.

Data analysis was done using the IBM SPSS Statistics, version 27. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) and chi-square statistical tests were performed to characterise the professional groups (justice, social, education, and health care) concerning variables involving sociodemographic characteristics; professional experience; specific training on human and child trafficking, duration of the training; and knowledge about the existence of a referral national action protocol for victims of human trafficking. ANOVA was also used to analyse total and knowledge areas scores concerning the professional group. A descriptive analysis of the information was conducted regarding participants' child trafficking knowledge and perceptions. Subsequently, *t*-tests for independent samples were applied to determine if there were differences in child trafficking knowledge and professionals' perception based on their sex, professional situation, having direct contact with victims, and specific training in this area. ANOVAs were conducted to determine if there were differences in knowledge and perceptions based on the previous contact with the phenomenon (formal and/or informal), participants' residence area, and socioeconomic and education level. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to assess the association among age, years on the current position, training length, and total mean of child trafficking knowledge and professionals' perceptions.

Participants

The sample was comprised of 614 participants who answered an online survey. A convenience sampling system was used, and participants were recruited from four main professional areas, such as justice, education, social work, and health care.

Results

Sociodemographic and Professional Characterisation of the Participants

The sample was composed of 614 participants with the average age of 42.42 ($SD=10.34$) years, varying between 20 and 69. As described in Table 1, the participants were mostly female ($n=349$, 56.8%) and lived in common-law marriage or were married ($n=423$, 68.9%). The majority of participants were Portuguese ($n=610$, 99.3%) and resided near the coast ($n=392$, 63.8%). A high number of participants revealed to belong to the middle socioeconomic level ($n=422$, 68.7%) and had a bachelor/college degree ($n=263$, 42.8%). Concerning the professional situation, the majority reported being employed ($n=606$, 98.7%).

Professionals belonged to the following groups: justice ($n=289$, 47.1%), education ($n=119$, 19.4%), social ($n=116$, 18.9%), and health care ($n=90$, 14.7%). Some professionals ($n=129$; 21.0%) reported having contacted with human trafficking victims in the past. From this group, 96 (15.6%) had contact with child victims. Table 2 presents a detailed description of professional experience characteristics of the total sample and by professional groups.

As for the previous contact with the subject of child trafficking, 593 (96.6%) participants reported having contact, while 21 (3.4%) stated never having contact with it. Of those who had contact, 317 (51.6%) stated having contact through informal sources, 92 (15%) through formal sources, and 184 (30%) with both. Within informal contacts, 415 (67.6%) participants indicated having contact the phenomenon through the news, films, documentaries,

Table 1 Characterisation of sample: sociodemographic factors

	Total Sample (<i>N</i> = 614)	Justice (<i>n</i> = 289)	Education (<i>n</i> = 119)	Social (<i>n</i> = 116)	Health care (<i>n</i> = 90)	Statistical test (<i>F</i> Or <i>X</i> ²)	Effect size (<i>Eta</i> ² squared or <i>Cramer</i> 's <i>V</i>)
Age <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	42.42 (10.34)	42.63 (9.13)	48.28 (10.91)	37.06 (9.06)	40.92 (10.81)	26.79****	0.12
Sex <i>n</i> (%)							
Male	265 (43.2)	201 (69.6)	22 (18.5)	21 (18.1)	21 (23.3)	155.68****	0.50
Female	349 (56.8)	88 (30.4)	97 (81.5)	95 (81.9)	69 (76.7)		
Marital status <i>n</i> (%)							
Single	140 (22.8)	52 (18.0)	25 (21.0)	40 (34.5)	23 (25.6)	26.25***	0.12
Common-law marriage or married	423 (68.9)	214 (74.0)	75 (63.0)	71 (61.2)	63 (70.0)		
Separated or divorced	46 (7.5)	21 (7.3)	17 (14.3)	5 (4.3)	3 (3.3)		
Widowed	5 (0.8)	2 (0.7)	2 (1.7)	-	1 (1.1)		
Nationality <i>n</i> (%)							
Portuguese	610 (99.3)	289 (100.0)	116 (97.5)	116 (100.0)	89 (98.9)	10.37	0.09
Foreign	3 (0.5)	-	2 (1.7)	-	1 (1.1)		
Dual nationality	1 (0.2)	-	1 (0.8)	-	-		
Residence area <i>n</i> (%)							
Coast	392 (63.8)	195 (67.5)	76 (63.9)	75 (64.7)	46 (51.1)	8.22	0.08
Interior	205 (33.4)	87 (30.1)	40 (33.6)	38 (32.8)	40 (44.4)		
Islands	17 (2.8)	7 (2.4)	3 (2.5)	3 (2.6)	4 (4.4)		
Educational level <i>n</i> (%)							
High school or less	169 (27.5)	155 (53.6)	7 (5.9)	5 (4.3)	2 (2.2)	208.37****	0.41
Bachelor/college degree	263 (42.8)	102 (35.3)	63 (52.9)	54 (46.6)	44 (48.9)		
Master/doctorate	182 (29.6)	32 (11.1)	49 (41.2)	57 (49.1)	44 (48.9)		

Table 1 (continued)

	Total Sample (<i>N</i> = 614)	Justice (<i>n</i> = 289)	Education (<i>n</i> = 119)	Social (<i>n</i> = 116)	Health care (<i>n</i> = 90)	Statistical test (<i>F</i> Or <i>X</i> ²)	Effect size (<i>Eta squared</i> or <i>Cramer's</i> <i>V</i>)
Socioeconomic level <i>n</i> (%)							
Lower middle	113 (18.4)	60 (20.8)	23 (19.3)	22 (19.0)	8 (8.9)	11.32 ⁺	0.10
Middle	422 (68.7)	188 (65.1)	79 (66.4)	86 (74.1)	69 (76.7)		
Upper middle	79 (12.9)	41 (14.2)	17 (14.3)	8 (6.9)	13 (14.4)		
Professional situation <i>n</i> (%)							
Employed	606 (98.7)	288 (99.7)	117 (98.3)	112 (96.6)	89 (98.9)	6.37 ⁺	0.10
Student	8 (1.3)	1 (0.3)	2 (1.7)	4 (3.4)	1 (1.1)		

⁺ *p* < 0.1. ****** *p* < 0.01. ******* *p* < 0.001.

Table 2 Characterisation of sample: professional experience

	Total sample (<i>N</i> =614)	Justice (<i>n</i> =289)	Education (<i>n</i> =119)	Social (<i>n</i> =116)	Health care (<i>n</i> =90)	Statistical test (<i>F</i> Or χ^2)	Effect size (<i>Eta</i> <i>squared</i> or <i>Cramer's V</i>)
Current function <i>n</i> (%)							
Magistrates	31 (5.1)	31 (10.7)	-	-	-		
Police officers	189 (30.8)	189 (65.4)	-	-	-		
Lawyers	8 (1.3)	8 (2.8)	-	-	-		
Other legal professionals	56 (9.1)	56 (19.4)	-	-	-		
Doctors	21 (3.4)	-	-	-	21 (23.3)		
Nurses	46 (7.5)	-	-	-	46 (51.1)		
Other health care professionals	5 (0.8)	-	-	-	5 (5.6)		
Social educators	4 (0.7)	-	-	4 (3.4)	-		
Social workers	25 (4.1)	-	1 (0.8)	23 (19.8)	1 (1.1)		
Psychologists	58 (9.5)	4 (1.4)	7 (5.9)	32 (27.6)	15 (16.7)		
Other social professionals	28 (4.6)	-	1 (0.8)	26 (22.4)	1 (1.1)		
Teachers/educators/trainers	91 (14.8)	-	88 (74.6)	3 (2.6)	-		
Other education professionals	33 (5.4)	-	18 (15.3)	15 (12.9)	-		
Researchers	18 (2.9)	1 (0.3)	3 (2.5)	13 (11.2)	1 (1.1)		
Years on the current position <i>M</i> (DP)	13.93 (10.83)	13.57 (9.28)	21.33 (12.56)	7.41 (8.22)	13.83 (10.22)	38.50***	0.16
Contact/work with victims <i>n</i> (%)	129 (21.0)	100 (34.6)	3 (2.5)	22 (19.0)	4 (4.4)	71.86***	0.34
Contact/work with child victims <i>n</i> (%)	96 (15.6)	79 (27.3)	2 (1.7)	13 (11.2)	2 (2.2)	76.40***	0.25

****p* < 0.001.

and/or television programs; 312 (50.8%) through mass media campaigns on human trafficking; and 157 (25.6%) from reading about it. Regarding formal contacts, 191 participants (31.1%) revealed having contact through training and awareness actions; 140 (22.8%) professionally; 72 (11.7%) had a class/lecture about it in university; and 37 (6%) reported human trafficking was addressed in several classes during university. Some participants ($n=4$; 0.7%) also pointed having contact through other means (e.g. volunteer work).

Characterisation of the Child Trafficking Knowledge and Professionals' Perceptions

Table 3 presents the results of the characterisation of professionals' child trafficking knowledge and perceptions by groups. Overall, participants scored an average of 0.73 ($SD=0.13$). Forms of exploitation ($M=0.81$, $SD=0.17$), followed by child trafficking in Portugal ($M=0.79$, $SD=0.20$), and traffickers' profile ($M=0.76$, $SD=0.28$) were the areas with a highest knowledge. The areas where the participants showed less knowledge were the dynamics of child trafficking ($M=0.71$, $SD=0.22$), risk/vulnerability factors ($M=0.69$, $SD=0.18$), and victims' profile ($M=0.62$, $SD=0.20$). Results also showed their negative perception regarding professionals' practices and skills to act in this field, scoring an average of 2.66 ($SD=0.59$).

The results were not statistically significant when assessing the differences between overall child trafficking knowledge and professional groups, $F(3, 610)=1.42$, $p=0.24$, $\eta^2=0.01$. However, there were significant differences between the dynamics of child trafficking knowledge and the participants' professional group, $F(3, 610)=3.21$, $p=0.02$, $\eta^2=0.02$. Gabriel's post hoc test revealed the professionals from the social area ($M=0.75$, $SD=0.20$) were more knowledgeable than professionals from the education group ($M=0.67$, $SD=0.22$). There were significant differences between knowledge about victims' profile and participants' professional group, $F(3, 610)=2.68$, $p=0.05$, $\eta^2=0.01$. Similarly, there were significant differences between the traffickers' profile knowledge, $F(3, 610)=3.35$, $p=0.02$, $\eta^2=0.02$, with professionals from health care area ($M=0.82$, $SD=0.25$) showing more knowledge than the ones from justice ($M=0.72$, $SD=0.30$). There were significant differences in the knowledge about child trafficking in Portugal, $F(3, 610)=10.93$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.05$, with professionals from justice ($M=0.83$, $SD=0.17$) scoring higher than the ones from the social area ($M=0.77$, $SD=0.21$), health care ($M=0.75$, $SD=0.20$), and education ($M=0.73$, $SD=0.21$).

The results were statistically significant when assessing the differences between perceptions about professionals' practices and skills and professional groups, $F(3, 610)=52.84$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.21$. Gabriel's post hoc test revealed that professionals from justice area ($M=2.93$, $SD=0.52$) presented more positive perceptions than the ones from the social area ($M=2.53$, $SD=0.54$), education ($M=2.36$, $SD=0.53$), and health care ($M=2.33$, $SD=0.54$).

Only two items presented a greater number of incorrect responses, namely the item "Minor victims of trafficking identify themselves as victims of crime" ($n=251$; 40.9%) and "Boys are mainly victims of labour exploitation" ($n=228$; 37.2%).

Overall, participants were more knowledgeable, in the following items, "Child trafficking can only be considered when a child is sexually exploited" ($n=596$; 97.1%) and "Boys are not victims of sexual exploitation" ($n=589$; 95.9%). Moreover, participants stated not knowing the answer on the items "In Portugal, there are support structures for trafficked children" ($n=276$; 45.0%) and "Minors with disabilities are more likely to be victims of human trafficking" ($n=252$; 41.0%; see Table 4).

Table 3 Child trafficking knowledge and professionals' perception, by professional groups

	Total sample (<i>N</i> = 614) <i>Mean (SD)</i>	Justice (<i>n</i> = 289) <i>Mean (SD)</i>	Education (<i>n</i> = 119) <i>Mean (SD)</i>	Social (<i>n</i> = 116) <i>Mean (SD)</i>	Health care (<i>n</i> = 90) <i>Mean (SD)</i>	<i>F</i> (3, 610)	<i>η</i> ²
Total score: child trafficking knowledge	0.73 (0.13)	0.73 (0.13)	0.71 (0.11)	0.74 (0.11)	0.74 (0.14)	1.42	0.01
Risk/vulnerability factors	0.69 (0.18)	0.69 (0.18)	0.71 (0.18)	0.69 (0.17)	0.69 (0.20)	0.63	0.00
Dynamics of child trafficking	0.71 (0.22)	0.70 (0.23)	0.67 (0.22)	0.75 (0.20)	0.74 (0.22)	3.21*	0.02
Forms of exploitation	0.81 (0.17)	0.82 (0.17)	0.80 (0.16)	0.83 (0.16)	0.79 (0.17)	1.37	0.01
Victims' profile	0.62 (0.20)	0.61 (0.20)	0.60 (0.19)	0.64 (0.19)	0.66 (0.20)	2.68*	0.01
Traffickers' profile	0.76 (0.28)	0.72 (0.30)	0.77 (0.26)	0.78 (0.27)	0.82 (0.25)	3.35*	0.02
Child trafficking in Portugal	0.79 (0.20)	0.83 (0.17)	0.73 (0.21)	0.77 (0.21)	0.75 (0.20)	10.93***	0.05
Total score: professionals' perceptions	2.66 (0.59)	2.93 (0.52)	2.36 (0.53)	2.53 (0.54)	2.33 (0.54)	52.84***	0.21

 * $p < 0.05$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4 Child trafficking knowledge survey

	Incorrect		Correct		Do not know	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Risk/vulnerability factors						
1. Child trafficking is a problem of so-called third world countries*	61	10.0	516	84.0	37	6.0
2. The causes of child trafficking are mainly poverty and social exclusion	245	40.0	268	43.6	101	16.4
3. Child refugees who travel unaccompanied are more vulnerable to human trafficking	19	3.1	533	86.8	62	10.1
4. Child trafficking occurs only in families with low educational and economic levels*	73	11.9	461	75.1	80	13.0
5. Minors with disabilities are more likely to be victims of human trafficking	147	24.0	215	35.0	252	41.0
6. Armed conflicts facilitate the exploitation of minors	5	0.9	559	91.0	50	8.1
Dynamics of child trafficking						
7. Child trafficking always involves some kind of travel, transportation, or movement of people to another country*	261	42.5	293	47.7	60	9.8
8. Child trafficking occurs only in connection with illegal activities*	246	40.1	283	46.1	85	13.8
9. Some trafficked children are sold by their parents	16	2.6	531	86.5	67	10.9
10. Abduction is the only means of child trafficking*	22	3.6	551	89.7	41	6.7
11. Trafficked children are always taken outside their country of origin*	90	14.6	383	62.4	141	23.0
12. The complex and hidden nature of child trafficking makes it difficult to identify	15	2.5	568	92.5	31	5.0
Forms of exploitation						
13. Begging is a form of child exploitation	13	2.1	562	91.5	39	6.4
14. Child trafficking can only be considered when a child is sexually exploited*	9	1.4	596	97.1	9	1.5
15. Minors can also be subjected to domestic servitude	14	2.3	569	92.7	31	5.0
16. Minors who work for family members or acquaintances in domestic situations cannot be considered victims of human trafficking*	103	16.8	350	57.0	161	26.2
17. Illegal adoption is not a form of human trafficking*	118	19.3	446	72.6	50	8.1
18. In the sports industry some minors are victims of human trafficking	16	2.6	396	64.5	202	32.9
19. Minors can be used to engage in criminal activities	13	2.1	582	94.8	19	3.1
Victims' profile						
20. Minor victims of trafficking usually ask for help or assistance*	46	7.5	411	66.9	157	25.6

Table 4 (continued)

	Incorrect		Correct		Do not know	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
21. Minor victims of trafficking identify themselves as victims of crime*	251	40.9	223	36.3	140	22.8
22. Child trafficking involving girls is mostly aimed at sexual exploitation	45	7.3	502	81.8	67	10.9
23. Human trafficking mainly affects women and children	164	26.7	363	59.1	87	14.2
24. Boys are mainly victims of labour exploitation	228	37.2	201	32.7	185	30.1
25. Boys are not victims of sexual exploitation*	9	1.5	589	95.9	16	2.6
Traffickers' profile						
26. Traffickers are usually people unknown to their victims*	111	18.1	322	52.4	181	29.5
27. Traffickers always operate within their own country*	12	1.9	529	86.2	73	11.9
28. Traffickers are exclusively men*	19	3.1	540	87.9	55	9.0
Child trafficking in Portugal						
29. Human trafficking is a crime recognized and punished by Portuguese law	13	2.2	578	94.1	23	3.7
30. There is no child trafficking in Portugal*	9	1.4	553	90.1	52	8.5
31. In Portugal, there are support structures for trafficked children	78	12.7	260	42.3	276	45.0
32. Human trafficking is a public crime in Portugal (anyone can report it)	10	1.6	544	88.6	60	9.8

*Inverted items for the analysis of total values (global and areas).

Regarding the professionals' perceptions, the item with the most negative perception was "My academic career has adequately prepared me to work with minors who are victims of human trafficking" ($n=459$; 74.7%), followed by "I can easily recognize a minor victim of human trafficking" ($n=431$; 70.2%). The only two items where participants presented a positive perception of their practice and skills were "If I come across a minor victim of human trafficking I know how to proceed" ($n=386$; 62.9%) and "It is unlikely that I will have contact with a minor victim of human trafficking in my workplace" ($n=284$; 46.3%) (see Table 5).

Training and Knowledge About the Referral National Action Protocol for Victims of Human Trafficking

Concerning training, 117 (19.1%) professionals reported having specific training in human trafficking, and 107 (17.4%) stated child trafficking was address. Participants reported attending an average of 17.90 h ($SD=19.29$) of training on human trafficking. The majority of participants ($n=422$, 68.7%) stated not being aware when asked about the existence of a referral national action protocol for victims of human trafficking.

Regarding justice professionals, 86 reported having training in human trafficking (73.5%) and 82 (76.6%) stated having training in child trafficking. These participants reported attending an average of 18.46 h ($SD=19.02$) of training on human trafficking. The majority ($n=155$, 53.6%) reported knowing of the existence of a referral national action protocol for victims of human trafficking.

A small number of education professionals reported having training in human trafficking ($n=3$, 2.6%) and three (2.8%) stated having training in child trafficking. These participants reported having attended an average of 13.00 h ($SD=15.56$) of training on human trafficking and the majority ($n=112$, 94.1%) reported not knowing of the existence of a referral national action protocol for victims.

Concerning the professionals from the social area, 26 (22.2%) stated having training in human trafficking and 20 (18.7%) reported having training in child trafficking. These participants reported having attended an average of 17.56 h ($SD=21.34$) of training on human trafficking. The majority ($n=91$, 78.4%) did not know about the existence of a referral national action protocol for victims.

Finally, two (1.7%) health care professionals mentioned having training in human trafficking and two (1.9%) stated having training in child trafficking, reporting attending an average of 6.00 h ($SD=2.83$) of training on human trafficking. The majority ($n=85$, 94.4%) reported not having knowledge about the existence of a referral national action protocol for victims.

Differences Between Sociodemographic Variables

Knowledge about child trafficking was not correlated with participants' age, $r=-0.02$, $p=0.63$. Contrarily, professionals' perceptions were positively correlated with their age, $r=0.09$, $p=0.03$. Older participants demonstrated better perceptions about their practice and skills.

There were no significant differences between participants' sex regarding their knowledge about child trafficking, $t(612)=-0.54$, $p=0.59$, $d=0.13$. However, there were significant differences regarding their perceptions, $t(612)=9.02$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.56$, with

Table 5 Professionals' perceptions about practices and skills

	Totally disagree		Disagree		Neither disagree nor agree		Agree		Totally agree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1. There are generally clear signs that a minor is being a victim of trafficking	52	8.5	258	42.0	170	27.7	126	20.5	8	1.3
2. If I come across a minor victim of human trafficking I know how to proceed	20	3.3	114	18.6	94	15.3	278	45.3	108	17.6
3. I can easily recognize a minor victim of human trafficking	99	16.1	332	54.1	154	25.1	25	4.1	4	0.7
4. My academic career has adequately prepared me to work with minors who are victims of human trafficking	188	30.6	271	44.1	110	17.9	38	6.2	7	1.1
5. My professional career has adequately prepared me to work with minors who are victims of human trafficking	140	22.8	273	44.5	118	19.2	74	12.1	9	1.5
6. I consider myself to have sufficient knowledge to signal, assist and refer a minor victim of human trafficking	78	12.7	223	36.3	132	21.5	164	26.7	17	2.8
7. It is unlikely that I will have contact with a minor victim of human trafficking in my workplace	71	11.6	213	34.7	149	24.3	147	23.9	34	5.5

men ($M=2.89$, $SD=0.56$) presenting more positive perceptions than women ($M=2.48$, $SD=0.56$).

There were partially significant differences between the professionals' residence in relation to their child trafficking knowledge, $F(2, 611)=2.44$, $p=0.09$, $\eta^2=0.01$. There were no significant differences between participants' residence and their perceptions of practices and skills, $F(2, 611)=0.51$, $p=0.60$, $\eta^2=0.00$.

When assessing the differences between socioeconomic level and participants' knowledge, the results were statistically significant, $F(2, 611)=5.35$, $p=0.01$, $\eta^2=0.02$, with people from upper middle class ($M=0.76$, $SD=0.11$) scoring higher than people from lower middle classes ($M=0.70$, $SD=0.15$). However, there was no significant difference regarding professionals' perceptions, $F(2, 611)=0.11$, $p=0.89$, $\eta^2=0.00$.

There were significant differences between participants' education level and child trafficking knowledge, $F(2, 611)=8.62$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.03$. The participants with master and/or doctorate had superior knowledge ($M=0.75$, $SD=0.13$) when compared to participants with bachelor and/or college degree ($M=0.73$, $SD=0.11$) and high school or less ($M=0.70$, $SD=0.14$). There were significant differences between the professionals' education level and their perceptions, $F(2, 611)=36.06$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.11$, professionals with high school or less had more positive perceptions ($M=2.94$, $SD=0.47$) when compared to participants with bachelor and/or college degree ($M=2.64$, $SD=0.59$) and master and/or doctorate ($M=2.43$, $SD=0.60$).

There were no significant differences between the professional situation and the knowledge about the phenomenon, $t(612)=0.18$, $p=0.86$, $d=0.13$. However, there were significant differences in relation to their perceptions, $t(612)=2.22$, $p=0.03$, $d=0.59$, with employed participants ($M=2.66$, $SD=0.59$) presenting more positive perceptions than students ($M=2.20$, $SD=0.72$).

Professional Experience and Training

There were significant differences between professionals' who had direct contact with victims of human trafficking regarding their child trafficking knowledge, $t(612)=-3.75$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.13$. Professionals who had contacted victims ($M=0.76$, $SD=0.12$) presented more knowledge than those who had never had contact with victims ($M=0.72$, $SD=0.13$). Furthermore, there were significant differences regarding professionals' perceptions, $t(612)=-8.03$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.56$, with professionals who had contacted victims ($M=3.01$, $SD=0.57$) presenting more positive perceptions than those who had never had contact ($M=2.56$, $SD=0.56$).

There were no significant differences between professionals who had direct contact with child victims and their knowledge about the phenomenon, $t(127)=0.52$, $p=0.61$, $d=0.12$, and the professionals' perceptions, $t(127)=0.63$, $p=0.53$, $d=0.58$. There was no significant correlation between years on the current position and child trafficking knowledge, $r=-0.05$, $p=0.18$, and professionals' perceptions, $r=0.02$, $p=0.61$.

There were significant differences between knowledge about child trafficking and being trained in human trafficking, $t(612)=-3.47$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.13$, with professionals who had training in human trafficking ($M=0.76$, $SD=0.12$) presenting more knowledge than those who had not ($M=0.72$, $SD=0.13$). Also, in the professionals' perceptions, there was a significant difference, $t(612)=-10.78$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.54$, with professionals who had training in human trafficking ($M=3.14$, $SD=0.53$) presenting more positive perceptions than those who had not ($M=2.54$, $SD=0.55$).

There were no significant differences between child trafficking knowledge and being trained in child trafficking, $t(115)=0.08$, $p=0.94$, $d=0.12$, but there were significant differences regarding professionals' perceptions, $t(115)=-2.36$, $p=0.02$, $d=0.52$, with professionals who had training in child trafficking ($M=3.18$, $SD=0.54$) presenting more positive perceptions than those who had not ($M=2.77$, $SD=0.35$).

Relations Between Child Trafficking Knowledge and Professionals' Perceptions

There was no significant association between knowledge about child trafficking and the professionals' perceptions about their practices and skills, $r=-0.00$, $p=0.94$.

Previous Contact with This Theme and Child Trafficking Knowledge

In the knowledge on child trafficking, significant differences were found in the existence of previous contact with the phenomenon, $F(3, 610)=9.59$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.05$. Gabriel's post hoc test revealed that participants with formal contact had a higher knowledge ($M=0.76$, $SD=0.12$) when compared to participants with both formal and informal contact ($M=0.75$, $SD=0.11$), informal contact ($M=0.71$, $SD=0.13$), and no contact at all ($M=0.67$, $SD=0.14$). In parallel, significant differences were found, in their perceptions, $F(3, 610)=41.73$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.17$. The participants who had a formal contact had more positive perceptions of their practice and skills ($M=3.07$, $SD=0.56$) relatively to participants who had both types of contacts ($M=2.84$, $SD=0.57$), informal contacts ($M=2.46$, $SD=0.52$), and no contact at all ($M=2.29$, $SD=0.38$).

Discussion

The present study explores the current knowledge of professionals from Portugal (justice, health care, social, and education) on child trafficking and professionals' perceptions about their practices and skills. Considering previous research done in Portugal (e.g. Cunha et al., 2019) and the results obtained in this paper, it is evident much remains to improve in professionals' knowledge, specifically in child trafficking. When knowledge is not clear and consolidated, individuals may become more permeable to bias and misconceptions, which could influence the way they perceive and interact with others in their daily lives, more specifically, in their work to assist, support, and protect child trafficking victims.

The area where professionals were more knowledgeable was the forms of exploitation. Child trafficking is much more complex, and it is reductive to think about it as occurring only in the context of sexual exploitation. Children are treated as commodities and spread across different exploitation sectors. According to the UNODC (2021), 66% of boys were trafficked for forced labour, 23% for sexual exploitation, and 11% for other forms of exploitation; as for the girls, 72% were trafficked for sexual exploitation, 21% for forced labour, and 7% for other reasons. Such knowledge is essential to be able to adopt adequate professional practices, as it gives professionals a more holistic view of reality and allows them to not neglect any warning signs specific to each form of exploitation.

Contrary to national results presented by other studies on professionals' knowledge on human trafficking (Cunha et al., 2019; Lourenço et al., 2018), child trafficking in Portugal was one of the areas of the survey with the highest results among professionals, with justice professionals presenting the highest results. Although Portugal is still taking the first

steps in this domain, the results revealed the effort made by the different anti-trafficking entities to raise awareness and inform key professionals, as presented in the 4th NPPCTHB (Resolution of the Council of Ministers No. 80/2018). Nonetheless, in this area, we can find one of the items that presented a higher number of “do not know” answers, namely “In Portugal, there are support structures for trafficked children”. This can partly be explained by the fact that the first shelter for child victims of trafficking opened in 2018 (GRETA, 2020), and key entities might not be aware of its existence.

Concerning the traffickers’ profile, most of the professionals were aware that traffickers could also be women, as the data presented in UNODC (2021) report shows. Women can adopt different roles during the trafficking process, benefiting from female gender roles who perceive women as caregivers. Thus, female traffickers are less likely to be suspected, becoming excellent assets for sheltering and transporting children (Tang, 1999, as cited in Shen et al., 2013). From professional groups analysed, the one who may have more access to perpetrators is justice professionals. Yet, this was the group that revealed less knowledge in this domain, as previously found by another study with this professional group (Lourenço et al., 2018). The lack of awareness in this area can be an obstacle to the investigation and recognition of cases, and at a further stage, the conviction of traffickers.

The areas of knowledge with the lowest scores were dynamics of child trafficking, risk and vulnerability factors, and victims’ profile. The dynamics of child trafficking is fundamental for good professional practices; however, the results identify it as one of the most fragile areas. Professionals from the social area score the highest in this area. This might happen considering that during their training and professional experience, these practitioners have more exposure to content, and settings related to child trafficking. The fact that child trafficking is a complex and hidden phenomenon, making it difficult to identify, is understood by most of the participants in this study. This is supported by Warriar et al. (2015) who stated that child trafficking identification is not an easy task due to its hidden nature and its connection to socio-political, cultural, and economic issues. Therefore, it can take time to identify the cases and consequently to protect and rehabilitate the victimised children.

Any professional who works in this field must be aware of the risk and vulnerability factors to which these children are exposed (West, 2016). Among the various factors presented in the survey that can lead to children’s victimisation, most participants did not know the answer to the item “minors with disabilities were at greater risk of being the target of human trafficking”. Nevertheless, the literature reports that girls with intellectual disabilities are at a higher risk of sexual exploitation, which increases their vulnerability. These victims are less likely to self-identify as victims of crime, to be less aware of the exploitation and its endangerments, becoming easier targets for manipulation and control of the offenders (Reid, 2016).

Lastly, the area with the lowest level of knowledge was the victims’ profile. Other national studies also identified this as one of the areas where professionals had less awareness (Cunha et al., 2019; Lourenço et al., 2018). Our findings show that the two items with the lowest score were related to the victims’ profile. One of the items reported to the difficulty that victims might have in identifying themselves as victims of crimes, which is corroborated by other studies (e.g. West, 2016). One of the obstacles to children’s disclosure of their victimisation is the inability to identify themselves as victims of crime, due to unawareness of the trafficking characteristics (West, 2016), lack of life experience, and ability to perceive the manipulation of the traffickers. This can result in emotional dependency towards the trafficker, feelings of guilt, shame, and hopelessness (Greenbaum, 2017). Besides being an obstacle to identification, it can also hinder the care and support process.

With this in mind, professionals must be aware of the idiosyncrasies of this crime, its impact on the victims, and adjust their practices accordingly. Professionals should create a physical and emotionally secure environment for victims to feel safe and comfortable to talk about their experiences (Classen & Clark, 2017), even if they do not understand what happened to them.

Notwithstanding that a large number of professionals were not aware that labour exploitation is the primary form of exploitation of boys (UNODC, 2021), the vast majority knew that sexual exploitation also could happen. This is in agreement with what was previously found in other studies, for example, a study developed with 323 professionals found that half of the professionals who had worked with victims of child sex trafficking revealed working with at least one male victim (Cole, 2018). According to Cole (2018), boys' identification can be challenging for professionals due to a lack of communities' awareness and the difficulty for boys to disclose their involvement in fear of being the target of prejudice. The same study found that boys had more criminal charges than girls. Being aware of this variability in exploitation forms and victims' profiles is a step to unveil cases that otherwise would remain hidden by stereotypes and structural problems.

The results raise some concerns about professionals' perceptions of their practices and skills, with them being globally negative. Mostly, professionals revealed not feeling prepared by their academic curriculum to work in this field, with only a scarce number of participants having contact with this theme during their college years. Given the importance that social, justice, health care, and education professionals have in the assistance, support, and protection of these children, education and training in human rights and citizenship must start from the basis of professional learning process, including childhood victimisation and more specifically child trafficking.

Professionals showed a negative perception of their ability to recognise possible child trafficking cases. But simultaneously, a larger number believed that there was a great possibility for them to have contact with a victim. These results are in line with the study conducted with the National Association of Paediatric Nurse Practitioners members from the USA, which concluded that although 86.4% of the nurses believed they might have had contact with a victim of trafficking in their practice, only 24% reported to being confident in their ability to identify a potential victim (Peck & Meadows-Oliver, 2019). The results revealed that participants felt confident that if they contacted a victim, they would know how to proceed. However, only one in every three professionals mentioned knowing about the referral national action protocol for victims of human trafficking. Previous research supports these findings. For example, a study with 782 health professionals found that 86.8% reported not knowing what questions to ask to identify potential victims and 53.4% lacked confidence in making appropriate referrals for children (Ross et al., 2015).

Moreover, professionals who were from the upper-middle class and had a master and/or doctorate level presented better results regarding child trafficking knowledge, which was partially corroborated by Cunha et al. (2019) since they found that besides higher levels of education, being female or older were positively correlated with overall human trafficking knowledge. These professionals may have access to more resources (e.g. technical, scientific) that facilitate access to reliable information about child trafficking. Notwithstanding the results revealing a partially significant difference between the professionals' residence towards their knowledge, it would be important that entities responsible for training strategic audiences invest in the interior of the country, to cover a broader territory, increasing the possibilities of detecting more alleged cases. In parallel, professionals who were older, male, with high school or less, and employed presented more positive perceptions about their practices and skills to act in child trafficking. It is hypothesised that this result may

be related to a feeling of self-confidence and self-efficacy presented by older and employed professionals since these variables may be linked with more opportunities for contact with the phenomenon. Furthermore, gender differences regarding professionals' perceptions are likely related to the higher percentage of justice professionals who were men and who also had more positive perceptions of their practices and skills.

Regarding professionals' perceptions, there was no association with higher levels of knowledge, nor with years in the current position. However, having experience working with human trafficking victims influences child trafficking knowledge and professionals' perceptions, which is corroborated by other studies (e.g. Fraley et al., 2017).

Contrarily to the original hypothesis, our results showed that the specific training in child trafficking does not influence the professionals' knowledge about the phenomenon. However, these professionals trained in child trafficking reveal a more positive perception of their practices and skills. Such results seem to demonstrate a false sense of security of the participants, created by previous training on the topic, which may be counterproductive in their work with these children. Thus, a question arises about the quality of the trainers and the information transmitted. These results can be explained by the Dunning-Kruger effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), which proposed that "those with limited knowledge in a domain suffer a dual burden: not only do they reach mistaken conclusions and make regrettable errors, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to accomplish it" (Kruger & Dunning, 1999, p. 1132), i.e. this incompetence, besides affecting the performance negatively, also interferes with the ability to recognise that one's performance is poor.

Another worrying result is that only one in five participants reported having specific training in human trafficking, being this number considerably smaller in child trafficking, meeting the results of other studies (e.g. Ross et al., 2015). This has high significance considering the national plans provide training for strategic audiences. Cunha et al. (2019) corroborated that previous training was the most powerful predictor of human trafficking knowledge.

Conclusion

The complex, dynamic, and multifaceted character of child trafficking requires transdisciplinary and collaborative work between various national and international organisations to respond appropriately to the victims' needs. The different key professionals must be prepared to adopt suitable practices that prioritise the child's best interests. Thus, the contact that professionals have with the phenomenon must be based on evidence and adjusted to the reality of each country either through more informal means (e.g. media) or through education and training.

All the professional groups represented in this study reported having contacted child trafficking victims; however, they revealed a lack of confidence in their practices and skills and the need to improve their knowledge. The results reinforce the necessity to invest in the preparation of different professionals in the prevention, identification, referral, investigation, intervention, prosecution, conviction, and (re)integration of child trafficking cases.

This study makes an important contribution, not only for Portugal, but also internationally. Thus, university education that includes human trafficking and specific training in this field must be present in the professional course of all key professionals (justice, social, education, and health care), being fundamental for adequate knowledge and development of positive perceptions about their practice and skills to prevent and combat child trafficking.

Moreover, it was possible to verify that professional experience with victims of human trafficking influences the professionals' knowledge and perceptions.

The present study aims to highlight the needs of the professionals who contact with this reality regarding their knowledge and perceptions, to inform actions of awareness and training programs. Educating and training key professionals on the risk and vulnerability factors, victimisation dynamics, forms of exploitation, the profile of the victim and the trafficker, and the current situation of the phenomenon in Portugal is essential for a more effective practice, which impacts the protection of child victims and prevents secondary victimisation. This understanding serves as a basis for knowing what and how to ask questions to the child, how to identify possible warning signs, and safely referring cases, always considering the best interests of the child.

It was considered several limitations. Firstly, the use of a self-report instrument is susceptible to the effects of social desirability, even with guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality. Moreover, the dissemination of the survey was exclusively online, not including professionals who do not have easy access to computer and internet technologies. Despite the sample size, the fact that it is a convenience sample constitutes a limitation to the statistical generalisation based on the results, reducing its impact. Another limitation is the lack of items related to knowledge about mental health problems and perceptions about the importance of adopting trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and victim-centred practices, as well as the importance of collaborative and transdisciplinary work to address this crime. Finally, this instrument was developed based on recent literature. However, the dynamic nature of child trafficking requires constant updates.

This study could represent a starting point for the development of more research on child trafficking in Portugal. Thus, given the importance that training programs have for knowledge and positive perceptions, it would be interesting for future research to study the different professional groups individually, the effectiveness and efficiency of training programs, and its implications on professional practices. Given the previously presented limitations, the investigation could focus on a more specific understanding of the practices of each professional group regarding trauma-informed care, culturally sensitive and victim-centred approach in working with child trafficking victims.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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