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Investigating organised human trafficking crimes: case studies of police investigations in England

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ABSTRACT

Investigating organised human trafficking criminality is neither easy nor straightforward. Among the complexity is the need to balance and secure multiple, and often competing, investigative goals. Using case studies of actual human trafficking investigations in England, the present exploratory study provides insights into the tensions between safeguarding victims while also (at the same time) building up evidence against those who exploit them in order to secure a successful prosecution. Findings reveal that factors associated with the assessed level of risk of victims, the intelligence available at the start of the investigation and police resources (balanced with opportunities and risk to secure the investigative goals) influence the investigative approach followed and strategies implemented, particularly those aiming to engage with victims. The exploratory findings illustrate the importance of intelligence in risk assessment and decision-making processes during police operations, but also the need to conduct yet further research on risk assessment within the context of human trafficking investigations to inform policy and decision-making policing practices.

Introduction

The UK's National Crime Agency (NCA[1] 2021) estimates that around 70,000 individuals are involved in organised crime in the UK, many of whom are predicted to be involved in the exploitation and trafficking of vulnerable people (Europol, 2021; NCA, 2021). In 2023, the number of people referred to the UK's National Referral Mechanism (NRM[2]) was the highest ever. Of the 17,004 individuals referred to the NRM, 49% of the cases concerned individuals exploited within the UK (HM Government, 2024). Contrary to common stereotypes of sex trafficking being the predominant form of exploitation and victims being predominantly female (Rodríguez-López, 2018), UK statistics reveal a predominance of male victims and identify criminal and labour as the most prevalent forms of exploitation (HM Government, 2024). Despite increased UK policing efforts to respond to the crimes and the rise of Human Trafficking (HT) police investigations (from 188 police operations in December 2016 to 3,335 in August 2021), this has only led to 1,175 prosecutions and 819 convictions between 2017–2020 (HM Government, 2021). The involvement of victims as commodities (rather than 'traditional' commodities associated with organised crime, such as drugs or weapons) presents particular challenges that investigations into other organised criminality may not face. Throughout the course of HT investigations, detectives are faced with

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various dilemmas, particularly those tensions between preventing further suffering for victims while also (at the same time) having to build up evidence against those who exploit them to secure successful prosecution for their crimes (UNODC, 2014). Hence, the decision on what action to take and what investigative route to follow is not always clear or straightforward (Verhoeven & Van Gestel, 2011).

While victim safeguarding must be ensured throughout the course of the investigation with a view to promoting their recovery (Council Directive 2011/36/EU; UNODC, 2009), research on HT police investigations has found that the goals of arrest and prosecution very often overweigh meeting victims' needs (Farrell et al., 2019). Despite policy and research recommendations to use victim-centred approaches in HT police operations (David, 2007; Farrell et al., 2012; Matos et al., 2019; Pajon & Walsh, 2020, 2022), the recent report on UK police response to trafficking and exploitation (HM Government, 2022) points out the limitations on securing victim safeguarding and the inconsistent approaches when implementing victim-centred and trauma-informed policing practices. In particular, the report found a lack of clear priorities among officers on how to balance victims' safeguarding needs, mainly when victims have engaged in criminal activities as a result of their exploitation or when they have entered the country illegally (HM Government, 2022). Farrell et al. (2019), when examining HT cases in the United States, also found that police responses need to transition to a more victim-centred approach, highlighting the need to move away from viewing the conviction of offenders as the main strategy to safeguard victims and 'secure' justice, and to focus more on the individuals' needs and concerns through the criminal justice process.

This study set out to identify policing practices and examine investigative choices during HT investigations by examining case studies of actual investigations in England. Using sense-making and decision-making as a theoretical framework, the study will examine the factors influencing investigators' decision-making on the investigative goals to pursue and the investigative actions to undertake. The purpose of the present study is not to generalise the results but to provide insight into the complexities of balancing investigative goals in HT investigations through the data-driven understanding of investigators' justifications for the decisions taken.

Sense-making and decision-making during criminal investigations

Referring broadly to the investigation of crime, many authors consider it an information-driven practice (Innes, 2003; O'Neill, 2018; Stelfox, 2009). That is, a criminal investigation is a complex form of sense-making involving a process composed of a series of actions that aim to produce knowledge to establish if, how, where, when, why and by whom a crime has been or will be committed (Ask, 2006; Cook & Tattersall, 2014; Innes, 2003; O'Neill, 2018). To this end, investigators will need to gather information, interpret and infer the meaning of such information, and decide what actions to take (Barrett, 2009; Canter, 2000; Fahsing & Ask, 2013; Innes, 2003; Stelfox, 2009).

Barrett (2009) argues that the investigation process can be viewed and studied from a problem-solving perspective. That is, the investigation of crime is a cyclical process of sense-making and action-taking. According to Barrett (2009), the investigation process would start with (i) the recognition of the problem; continuing with (ii) the mental representation and definition of such problem, according to and in the context of the investigative goals; followed by (iii) the development and implementation of strategies or sequences of actions to target the different investigative subgoals; and, finally, (iv) the evaluation of those actions and its outcomes in relation to the end goal (Barrett, 2009). Other authors have also found a similar cognitive pattern when examining investigative decision-making. Wright (2013), for example, qualitatively analysed 40 detectives' 'think aloud' accounts for homicide crime scenes, identifying a cognitive sequence composed of the following phases: (i) assessment of the crime scene; (ii) hypothesis generation of the nature of the event; (iii) inferences about the type of homicide; and (iv) decision-making on the next actions to take. Overall, research findings suggest the investigation process is formed of repetitive cycles of

action, evaluation and decision, involving gathering information, then interpreting and evaluating the information available to generate explanations of what may have happened, followed by deciding on the lines of enquiry and the next course of actions to either confirm or falsify the hypothesis (Canter, 2000; Stelfox, 2009).

Investigators may obtain information from a wide variety of sources, such as the crime scene, witnesses, victims, or databases (Innes, 2003; O'Neill, 2018). Yet, it is less of a matter of quantity of information and more of relevance, accuracy and detail of the information obtained (Dando & Ormerod, 2017; Fahsing & Ask, 2017). Innes (2021) introduced the concept of 'mosaicking' to refer to detectives articulating and blending together different types of information, intelligence and evidence to construct a case narrative. However, in most criminal investigations, and indeed in trafficking investigations, the information available and obtained is complex, incomplete, ambiguous, and even contradictory or irrelevant (Barrett, 2009; Fahsing, 2016; Fahsing & Ask, 2013; Wallace, 2015). In such complex and uncertain situations, individuals tend to rely on heuristics and inferences to fill the gaps and form a coherent story of what has happened, combining both the specific information available for the case as well as their general knowledge/expertise of detective work (Barrett, 2009; Fahsing, 2016; Wright, 2013). Investigative sense-making is, therefore, understood as a pragmatic and abductive process, aiming to generate and evaluate different hypotheses to identify the most likely explanation (Fahsing & Ask, 2017).

Abductive reasoning involves constructing the best possible account of complex and ambiguous events from limited information and intelligence (Innes, 2003). During the sense-making process, cognitive frames are used to compare and order confusing situations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). That is, cognitive frames help detectives contextualise the information and relate it to previous experiences and future expectations (Hallgren et al., 2021). Research has found that detectives often use legal frames to make sense of the situation, looking for cues related to legally determined scripts (Ormerod et al., 2008). However, relying on abductive reasoning and heuristics does not come without risks. Inadequate sense-making could lead to missed opportunities, wasting resources and time (Barrett, 2009), and in complex crimes such as HT, it could even lead to further offences in addition to an increased number of victims being exploited. Besides, from an evidential perspective, the use of heuristics comes with risks, widely discussed in the criminal investigation literature, such as confirmation bias and tunnel vision (Ask & Alison, 2010; Rossmo, 2009), where investigators become narrowly focused (say on a suspect or a hypothesis) selecting evidence that confirms a hypothesis and ignoring other information which might undermine it (Findley & Scott, 2006).

To avoid such risk, investigators should generate as many hypotheses as possible, gather as much relevant information and evidence as possible before deciding upon which lines of enquiry or courses of action to pursue, and exhaustively test as many hypotheses as possible (ACPO, 2005; Innes, 2003). However, in practice, research has often found that criminal investigations are defined by (i) uncertain, complex and dynamic environments; (ii) shifting and competing goals that investigation teams need to balance with time (and other resources) constraints; (iii) the interactions of multiple actors (including criminal justice professionals, media, members of the public); and (iv) dynamic risks (Dror & Fraser-Mackenzie, 2009; Innes, 2003). Hence, while decision-making upon which lines of enquiry to pursue and action to undertake is critical for the investigation process, investigative decision-making is undertaken in a context that is far from ideal (Fahsing, 2016; Innes, 2003; Tong & Bowling, 2006).

Previous research on decision-making and sense-making has identified a series of factors that prevent investigators from making decisions in optimal circumstances (Alison et al., 2013; Ask, 2006; Ask & Granhag, 2005, 2007, Fahsing & Ask 2016; Kim et al., 2020; Wallace, 2015). Among the most commonly cited ones are time pressure and resources. Time pressure has been found to (i) affect the flexibility and creativity of the decision-maker, hence impacting the number of alternative hypotheses generated and strategies to test the hypotheses (Alison et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2020); (ii) lead to a more selective and biased search and assessment of information based on previous beliefs

and expectations (Ask & Granhag, 2005); and (iii) reduce investigators' ability to keep an open mind, them becoming more reluctant to change their hypothesis in front of contradictory evidence (Ask & Granhag, 2007). The negative effect of time pressure in decision-making is aggravated whenever there are ongoing risks (e.g., to people) involved, as critical decisions will need to be made in a very reduced time frame (Shortland et al., 2020). For instance, in trafficking investigations, the unexpected identification of a minor under an exploitative situation while conducting surveillance will likely prompt a quick police response to remove the child from the risky situation. Yet, such a response could potentially blow up the police operation and put other victims in further danger/ risk.

Those types of decisions, in which there is no easy or ideal course of action, are referred to as least-worst decisions; decisions in which any course of action will involve high risk and could potentially have significant and negative consequences for the investigation or actors involved in it (Power & Alison, 2017). In this type of situation, the decision-maker would mentally represent the potential consequences and implications of different actions that could be undertaken (Shortland et al., 2020). To this end, investigators will also use heuristics in the decision-making process by relying on their previous knowledge and experience, and so deciding which course of action to take (Fahsing, 2016; Shortland et al., 2020; Wright, 2013). For example, by reflecting on the actions taken in previous and similar situations that resulted in favourable outcomes (Ask, 2006). Such cognitive strategies allow investigators to minimise the complexity and make pragmatic decisions based on the information available rather than on the information that could be obtained (Fahsing, 2016). In such contexts, heuristics can become effective strategies for making sense of limited, complex or ambiguous information. Yet, they may also lead to decisions being made more efficiently but not always more effectively (Snook & Cullen, 2009). Limited resources have also been found to influence the decision not to gather specific evidence that may be perceived as costly and time-consuming when investigators believe there is already enough evidence to prove the offence (Findley & Scott, 2006). Moreover, limited resources and information may result in over-reliance on heuristics and cognitive shortcuts (Barrett, 2009). Linked to limited resources, organisational pressures to close the case, or organisational and peer perception of indecisiveness as costly and resource-consuming may also promote a biased search and interpretation of evidence (Fahsing & Ask, 2013; Wallace, 2015).

Balancing investigative goals during human trafficking investigations

During HT criminal operations, investigators are faced with a number of challenges, complexities and uncertainties, from the very early identification of cases to the conviction of offenders and safeguarding of victims, which, together, will likely influence investigators' decisions and promote their reliance on heuristics when assessing intelligence available and deciding on what goals to pursue and what course of action to take to secure the investigative goals.

HT victims are unlikely to report their experiences to the police (Farrell et al., 2019). Reasons include the lack of awareness of their own victimisation and legal rights (Meshkovska et al., 2016), fear of retaliation (Newton et al., 2008) or fear of being prosecuted or deported due to their involvement in illegal activities as a result of their exploitation (Farrell et al., 2008). Additionally, victims might be reluctant to engage with the police due to previous negative experiences or the belief that they will not be believed or helped (Farrell et al., 2008, 2012). The unwillingness of victims to cooperate and actively engage with the police, combined with the lack of training and police awareness on HT, could lead to an overreliance on heuristics and errors in sense-making, leading to the misidentification of victims as illegal immigrants or sex workers, mainly if they do not fit the stereotype of victims (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Raphael et al., 2010).

Helfferich et al. (2011), after interviewing 51 victims of exploitation, found that victims' willingness to make a statement depends, among other factors, on how the police interact with them in the initial encounters and throughout the criminal investigation process. The authors found that

factors related to building trust, having empathy, and recognising them as victims promoted victim engagement. Yet, getting the account from HT victims takes time and can become challenging and demanding due to incomplete and conflicting accounts, victims failing to remember specific details and other inaccuracies in the recollection of events due to trauma and/or fear (Clawson et al., 2006; Cockbain & Brayley-Morris, 2018). Furthermore, if undertaken incorrectly, victim interviewing could re-traumatise them, increase their anxiety and, ultimately, impede the recalling of information and long-term engagement (Farrell et al., 2012; Meshkovska et al., 2016). Such difficulties in gathering victims' testimony, alongside resource constraints and time and organisational pressures to minimise risks and threats to victims and wider society (Brunovskis & Skilbrei, 2016; David, 2008; Farrell et al., 2008, 2014, 2019), could explain why studies such as the one from De Vries and Farrell's (2023) examining police tactics in cases of exploitation found that the most predominant actions used in HT investigations were reactive tactics such as arrests and shutdowns of venues, despite police officers emphasising the need and relevance of victim-centred and trauma-informed approaches. The authors found that organisational priorities and structures, the need to coordinate a response with other agencies (and the time and effort that this implies), and time pressures to manage risk and prevent future victimisation were common justifications that explained the use of reactive practices.

According to sense-making and decision-making research (Barrett, 2009; Fahsing, 2016; Wright, 2013), the complexity and uncertainty that investigators face during HT investigations (alongside time and organisational pressures to close the case and safeguard victims at risk) will likely influence their decisions and promote reliance on heuristics to assess the intelligence available and decide what goals to pursue and what course of action to take to secure the investigative goals. This study will explore those factors that influence investigative choices to balance and secure (often competing) investigative goals during HT operations.

Methodology

The present exploratory study uses data from actual HT investigations, using case study methodology (Baxter & Jack, 2008) to examine the investigative practice through the analysis of three HT police operations conducted by an English police force. After obtaining ethical approval from the second author's Faculty Research Committee and police vetting from the participating police force, the Detective Chief Inspector of the Serious Organised Crime Unit (SOCU) was asked to identify investigations conducted after the implementation of the UK's Modern Slavery Act 2015 that met the following criteria: (i) that there was a trial date set up by the time data was collected (for those cases yet to involve a conviction); (ii) the case involved adult exploitation and organised criminality; and (iii) the researcher would be able to interview the investigators of the case and have access to police records considered as relevant for the study. Three HT operations met the selection criteria, namely operations Seine, Nile and Thames.[3] Operation Seine consisted of the investigation of an Organised Criminal Group (OCG) involved in the suspected labour exploitation of Czech Republic nationals; Operation Nile consisted of a joint investigation conducted by English and Romanian police teams investigating an OCG involved in the sex trafficking of Romanian nationals to the UK; while Operation Thames consisted of a large Chinese OCG operating across the UK that was suspected of the sexual exploitation of Chinese women.

The first author conducted a total of six interviews with all the lead investigators of each police operation that we analysed (3 for Seine, 1 for Nile, and 2 for Thames). As one detective sergeant was involved in two of the operations examined, that meant that only five unique investigators participated in the study. As such, five policing practitioners' experiences and perspectives are included (see Table 1 for participants' details). They were all male investigators. No further descriptive information was gathered to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Unstructured interviews lasted between two and three hours. All interviewees were invited to give a free recall of the police operation. This was followed by a series of open questions seeking to gather more in-

Table 1. Participants' details.

Rank	Interviewee 1 Detective inspector	Interviewee 2 Detective Sergeant	Interviewee 3 Inspector	Interviewee 4 Detective Sergeant	Interviewee 5 Detective inspector
Operation involved					
Seine		X	X	X	
Nile					X
Thames	X	X			

depth insight and contextualisation of the interviewee's experience and decisions taken in relation to the investigative goals, the strategies, and the actions taken during the police operations. After transcribing the interviews, to minimise potential limitations that the retrospective recalling of information of an event may have (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Gabbert et al., 2018), we compared the information from the narratives to information in police files and official documents. The documents provided by the respective investigator leads included operational orders (e.g., for reception centres, search warrants), court presentations (with operation timelines included) and minutes from partnership meetings. No discrepancies were found between the narratives and the documents we were given access to. After familiarisation with the qualitative data, the first author inductively coded the data to identify emergent themes related to investigative decision-making and sense-making processes. Those themes were then used across the different operations to recognise patterns emerging from the data, allowing a more in-depth analysis of those factors influencing decision-making processes during HT operations (Schoch, 2020).

Findings

The qualitative analysis of the data reveals two main and interlinked types of decisions detectives made throughout the investigations; they are decisions on what investigative goal(s) to pursue and what investigative approach and action(s) to take to secure such goals. The primary investigative goals identified in all police operations were (i) gathering evidence to secure the prosecution of offenders; and (ii) engaging with victims to safeguard them and involve them in the criminal justice process. Nonetheless, despite victim safeguarding being referred by all interviewees (from all three operations), the main differences found between the police operations analysed related to the planning and implementation of strategies and actions to secure victims' engagement and safeguarding, which resulted in the engagement and referral to the NRM of 11 victims (out of 15 identified) in Operation Seine and the complete non-engagement of victims in either operations Thames and Nile.

Operation Seine differed from Operations Thames and Nile in its focus on securing victim engagement and the robustness of the victim strategy planned and implemented. While all three operations conducted investigative actions aiming to gather and/or review intelligence either proactively (e.g., use of cover and surveillance) or reactively (review previous intelligence on the police system), in Operation Seine, the intelligence gathering strategy was not only focused on evidence-gathering to prove exploitation but also on getting a better intelligence picture of the victims exploited, including information on the number of potential victims, their names and their backgrounds. Such intelligence was used later in the investigation to inform the victim's strategy and build rapport and trust with the victims.

> Before the main day [i.e. day of action, aiming to arrest offenders and safeguard victims], we already knew who they [victims] were. I sent an over team to stand by, stop the van they used to transport victims and do a stop routine check with all the body cameras on. And that is how we took all the images of the members inside the van. This was a strategy purely to identify people in the van, so then, when we go to the door on the day, you know the names, and it is a little bit of a break-up: 'we know you are such and such, come, please, and talk to us'. So you got a little bit more knowledge about it. (Interviewee 4, Detective Sergeant, Operation Seine)

All investigators interviewed recognised victims' willingness to report their victimisation as the critical factor to secure their engagement (i.e., investigative goal). Yet, an important difference between Operation Seine and Operations Thames and Nile was the planning and actions taken on the 'day of action'[4] to promote victim engagement after them being removed from the exploitative situation. Using the intelligence previously gathered, the victim strategy in Operation Seine consisted of (i) involving interpreters from the initial contact with the victims; (ii) organising a reception centre with multiple agencies to promote victim safeguarding; (iii) foreseeing and planning responses to deal with a potential alpha victim;[5] (iv) using charity workers that spoke victims' native language to build rapport; and (v) giving victims time and space to understand and assimilate what was happening before conducting a police interview. Overall, such a victim-centred strategy resulted in opportunities to build rapport. The strategy was also thought to be associated with the victims engaging in the investigation.

> Guys [members of charities] were going out for a smoke and joining them [victims]; they kind of ended up with this kind of commonality. And just let them do the rapport building on our behalf, so then when they say right, let's start doing the screening process, people were much more relaxed and more willing to speak freely about what happened. (Interviewee 2, Detective Sergeant, Operation Seine)

In contrast, for the Thames and Nile operations, when victims were identified on the properties/brothels, they were arrested and taken to the police station. Investigators justified such arrest as an opportunity to interview potential victims and assess and minimise individual victims' risks.

> We would arrest them first because at least we can take them to the police station, which is a place of safety. And just because we arrest someone doesn't mean we have to charge them with an offence [. . .]. What do we need to do with these girls? [. . .] So, make sure they have someone or somewhere to go; if they need to get a train, we'll drop them to the train station, or take them home, or whatever it might be, and we'll make sure before they leave that they know where they go. (Interviewee 1, Detective Inspector, Operation Thames)

Our examination of the data found that the decision to take such different approaches to secure investigative goals was based on (i) the assessment of risk for the victims; and (ii) the intelligence available at the start of the police operation. Furthermore, our data also revealed that the implementation of strategies and actions was influenced (and constrained) by resources, uncertainty, and available opportunities.

Assessment of victims' risk

Despite interviewees recognising that proactive investigative strategies proved more effective in securing victims' engagement (i.e., investigative goal), the assessed level of risk for the victims was a critical aspect that determined the approach followed. When the risk for the victims was considered high and immediate, we found that investigators were unable to justify a proactive approach focused on gathering intelligence and evidence on the victims before taking police action to remove them from an exploitative situation. Therefore, reactive and immediate interventions to rescue victims were the preferred strategies in such cases. Our data from all three operations has revealed that the nature of exploitation was a determinant in assessing whether the risk was high or low. As Interviewee 4 explains, sex trafficking victims are considered at a higher risk than labour exploitation; therefore, the strategy followed in Operation Seine could not have been justified for the other two operations involving sexual exploitation.

> It is difficult because, with other trafficking jobs we've run, it is how long do we leave these victims in this situation? We had it with some sexual exploitation. We were given a day because you can't leave an 18-year-old girl being sexually exploited for 3 months; we could not sign for that. (Interviewee 4, Detective Sergeant, Operation Seine)

Although a proactive and intelligent-led approach was adopted in Operation Seine to gather intelligence on victims and offenders, the detectives made reference to the dynamic characteristics

of the risk and, consequently, the need for constant assessment and monitoring to change the investigative approach if necessary. That is, moving from a proactive to a reactive strategy if the risk level increases. Nevertheless, differently from the initial risk assessment, the assessment of the immediate risk during the policing operation was balanced with (i) the potential risks of losing opportunities for evidence-gathering; and (ii) the other potential risks that the police intervention could create, for instance, resulting in offenders moving and relocating other victims and consequently, increasing victims' vulnerabilities and risks.

> So from the beginning of the investigation, the biggest issue we had was, how long do we leave it running? What happens if we see something while doing surveillance? Assaults? […]so I had to write a decision policy on what to do […], kind of establish the criteria, how, when do I intervene? At what point do I blow a complete operation for an assault? […], is it worth it? and I know this is, it is always a horrible decision for us, but is worth it to blow a complete operation for somebody being slapped? [.] If, with a small assault, we intervene, but we have no power to do anything else, we could also be causing major risks. And then, it could get worse, and we wouldn't be able to see it, and I am looking at the risks, and any high assault level […] and there will always be decisions on the moment/day, cause you cannot legislate for every single possible scenario. (Interviewee 4, Detective Sergeant, Operation Seine)

Intelligence available

While not specifically mentioned by investigators as a reason for adopting a proactive or reactive strategy to secure victim engagement and safeguarding, differences in intelligence available at the start of the investigation promoted certain investigative decisions and actions. In operations Nile and Thames, brothels linked to the case had previously come to the police attention (mainly through members of the public calls on public disorder). These police operations were managed as isolated cases by non-specialised units (and with limited resources), being assessed by officers as one-time events and with no or low risk of exploitation. It was after intelligence checks led investigators to believe organised criminality could be involved and that several victims could be exploited when the case was allocated to the specialised investigative unit with more expertise and resources.

> they discovered more links that tie them all together, which is when they went like this is getting too big […], and this is how we [i.e. SOCU] got involved. (Interviewee 2, Detective Sergeant, Operation Thames)

On the other hand, in Operation Seine, before the victim came forward to report the crime and give information about other victims, modus operandi and locations where exploitation was taking place, a multi-agency operation was already in place, gathering and sharing intelligence on a potential case of exploitation.

> A victim came forward […], he gave the disclosure […]. Essentially, he told the police everything that matched the intelligence picture. So, we put all the intelligence together and did a form of briefing and, as a partnership [multi-agency operation leading the disruption strategy], we were asked to stop any disruptive plan and wait till the police investigation was completed before taking any further action. (Interviewee 3, Inspector, Operation Seine)

Such differences at the start of the investigation may well have influenced the approach taken. While in Operation Seine, the intelligence-led approach aimed to gather evidence to prove the intelligence picture that they already had from the victim's report and the multi-agency operation (and to promote victim engagement to secure further evidence), in Operations Thames and Nile, the intelligence-led approach was based on analysing and reviewing previous intelligence in the system and police databases to construct (from zero) an intelligence picture of the offence, the criminal network and the potential victims involved.

> There was more time invested, in terms of the investigation, on what was recovered previously. So most of our time was, literally, collecting everything that has been gathered in terms of the statement, whom they spoke to, the adverts. (Interviewee 5, Detective Inspector, Operation Nile)

> The investigation was more reactive from the information that we've got, rather than the proactive side of it. (Interviewee 1, Detective Inspector, Operation Thames)

Consequently, actions in operations Thames and Nile were more 'reactive' and 'responsive' to the evidence and intelligence found from reviewing intelligence and financial information available on the police system. For instance, whenever criminality was suspected of taking place in properties and locations, search warrants were conducted in these addresses to find further evidence and identify victims. Together, the little available information on victims and the risk of sexual exploitation being perceived as high might explain the lack of a proactive and robust strategy to engage with victims even when planning search warrants.

Resources, opportunities and uncertainty

We found throughout the interviews that resources were considered critical factors in the decision to take investigative actions and secure investigative goals. Officers' accounts reveal that to allocate resources, there is a need to consider (i) the level of threat and risk; (ii) the opportunities different actions generate to achieve the investigative goals; and (iii) the level of uncertainty in securing the intended outcomes.

As data from Operation Thames and Nile reveal the seriousness of the offence, the threat that an OCG poses, and the risk of multiple potential victims being exploited prompted the dedication of more resources to analyse the intelligence previously gathered. As Interviewer 5 reflects during the interview when discussing the amount of intelligence available on the police system from previous police interventions that, while stored in the police system, had never been analysed (and, in this case, translated) before:

> We could have translated, but at that time, because it was a different department dealing with it and, at that time, they did not realise the extent of the investigation and that it would take as far as this European investigation. At that time, for them, there were single brothels that were popping up, and they were not thinking they were potentially linked, so it would have been a lot of investment for just one single brothel in terms of getting an interpreter, pay them to translate one single phone. (Interviewee 5, Detective Inspector, Operation Nile)

Yet, the dedication of resources based on the level of threat and risk was limited by the police force's capacity and capability. As demonstrated in Operation Thames, after it was found that the OCG was operating across the UK, the case was sent to the NCA as the police force did not have the capacity to dismantle the whole operation. Instead, the force focused its investigation on those OCG members operating in their police area so the NCA could lead the operation nationally.

> What you are talking about here is about a huge OCG in China, an organised network in the UK, and being honest, the Chinese have been trafficking girls, but this is just one of their forms of criminality, [. . .]. It is huge, [. . .], imagine you try to run an organisation such as Amazon, which operates across the UK, and you are talking about thousands of people to be logistically managed [. . .]. We are taking out six key players, but still, we are missing two of the key players, and this is just for the [police region], that is not including people that we don't know about or that haven't been found. (Interviewee 2, Detective Sergeant, Operation Thames)

We also found that uncertainty about the outcomes was also commonly mentioned as a challenge when considering the implementation of certain strategies over others, deciding on the best course of action and planning the operation. For example, when planning search warrants, few interviewees referred to the uncertainty and limitations of predicting what would happen after. A major risk highlighted was the possibility of identifying potential victims in a property and being underprepared to safeguard them.

> And we weren't expecting to find any more victims, and we didn't, thankfully. Because it was always in the back of my mind we may go through these doors and find other 5 or 6 victims, because I pulled down the surveillance as I couldn't justify keeping people on surveillance on, because we got so much evidence. (Interviewee 4, Detective Sergeant, Operation Seine)

Such uncertainty also relates to the investment of time and resources to conduct search warrants with little reassurance that evidence or useful intelligence would be obtained.

> And a lot of the time, we don't know what you are going to find till you get there, which can be strange, but we've been to a couple of addresses that were empty; you can see that people have been there, you find paperwork, etc., but there is nothing we can use really. (Interviewee 1, Detective Inspector, Operation Thames)

Or, in contrast, to obtain more intelligence and evidence that could have been foreseen that, while useful for the investigation, its review could lead to considerable delays in the investigations. Therefore, making it difficult to plan the strategy and the whole operation accurately.

> Much volume of work sits behind the scene, all the paperwork. Every time you search a house, and you end up there, you find bags and bags of evidence, and I mean thousands of documents to review. (Interviewee 2, Detective Sergeant, Operation Seine)

The difficulty in predicting how long the review of the evidence would take and the likelihood of having to delay the investigation and/or dedicate more resources than originally planned was also a risk highlighted when reviewing intelligence previously gathered in the police system.

> It takes a long time, one of the phones we had. It had nearly a million pages of data [. . .]. And [the translator] has constantly been working three days a week just doing the phones, and then there is the analysis. (Interviewee 1, Detective Inspector, Operation Thames)

Similar to search warrants, when reflecting on undercover strategies, interviewees recognised the opportunities these strategies offer to obtain intelligence on offenders, their modus operandi and the victims. Nonetheless, undercover tactics were also identified as highly resource-intensive, with no complete reassurance that they would produce the intelligence and evidence expected. Furthermore, such strategies had the major risk of offenders finding out police were investigating them (by, for instance, police officers having to intervene if a victim was at high risk) and, therefore, jeopardising other strategies such as parallel financial investigations.

Closing properties, either with or without the involvement of partner agencies, was commonly mentioned as an opportunity to disrupt criminality and prevent further exploitation in the event the investigative team would be unsuccessful in securing victims' engagement and/or the prosecution of offenders. Yet, detectives also acknowledge that such action could have a knock-on effect, putting victims in a more vulnerable situation.

> Sometimes we would close the house [. . .]. But then, you got a female that has been trafficked, or we believe so, and don't want to tell us anything, who is now homeless in a strange country, where she can't speak the language, and this is the problem. So you can end up, if you are not careful, adding vulnerabilities to these individuals. (Interviewee 1, Detective Inspector, Operation Thames)

Discussion

In the present study, we aimed to provide insight into those elements and factors influencing investigative goals and strategies followed during HT investigations. In all three police operations, we found two clear goals: gathering evidence to secure a conviction and engaging with victims to promote safeguarding. Yet, factors associated with the assessed level of risk of victims, the intelligence available at the start of the investigation and police resources (balanced with opportunities and risk to secure the investigative goals) were found to influence the investigative approach followed and strategies implemented, particularly those aiming to engage with victims.

Previous research on HT investigation has found that the characteristics of the offence and the intelligence available have a cornerstone role in the decision to take (and even change) the investigative direction, approach and action (Pajon & Walsh, 2020; Verhoeven & Van Gestel, 2011). That is, intelligence and information are constantly gathered and evaluated, considering the specific context, investigative goals, risks and threats (Pajon & Walsh, 2020). Nonetheless, according to the literature on sense-making and decision-making (Barrett,

2009; Fahsing, 2016; Power & Alison, 2017; Shortland et al., 2020; Wright, 2013), examination of the intelligence and decisions made are also influenced by previous investigators' experiences and knowledge. Prior research has found that the analysis and interpretation of intelligence and information, and consequently, the lines of enquiry pursued, are influenced by legal frameworks (Ormerod et al., 2008). Officers would use internalised cognitive frames (including stereotypes and misconceptions about who victims of trafficking are and how they behave) and externally imposed legal scripts to make sense of the information, looking for cues that relate to legally determined scripts, to then decide on lines of inquiry (Ormerod et al., 2008).

The use of legal frameworks might explain the misidentification of cases of exploitation in Operation Thames and Nile by isolated events/incidents but also the lack of a robust victim strategy and the limited focus on securing evidence from victims in these two operations. Officers need to gather enough evidence to prove to the jury that a crime has been committed and that the defendants are involved. Therefore, it is likely that sense-making was guided by legal scripts to prove HT, and also by officers' judgments of the quality of the trace to prove and evidence the offence (Bitzer et al., 2016). We found in the present study that decision-making was influenced by the assessment of 'how worthy' it was to dedicate resources to certain police actions/interventions, considering the opportunities these police actions would offer to secure evidence and the uncertainties and risks they had for the police investigation and the actors involved. Previous research has found that police officers tend to find eyewitness memory significantly less reliable compared to physical traces when it comes to presenting it to the jury (Jang et al., 2020). Moreover, in HT cases, difficulties in engaging with trafficked victims (and keeping them involved in the criminal justice procedure) and gathering accurate victims' accounts are well recognised (Cockbain & Brayley-Morris, 2018; Farrell et al., 2008, 2012; Meshkovska et al., 2016). Cockbain and Brayley-Morris (2018), examining labour exploitation investigations in the UK, found that not only is it complex to engage with victims, but it is also challenging to secure and maintain their cooperation throughout the investigation process, resulting in great difficulties in securing their attendance in court. According to Meshkovska et al. (2016) findings, the length of the criminal process, the limited possibilities for financial compensation, the possibilities for secondary victimisation and the fear of retribution are some of the key reasons for the lack of engagement noted by professionals and victims of trafficking. Besides, changing accounts, inaccuracies, or victims failing to remember specific details about their victimisation experience (Clawson et al., 2006) might make them appear as unreliable witnesses. Consequently, detectives´ perceptions of physical and financial evidence being more conclusive to prove exploitation, potential previous failures and known difficulties in securing victims' testimony, alongside proactive and victim-centred approaches being seen as more time and resource-consuming than reactive approaches, might well explain why, in Operations Thames and Nile, the focus was mainly on gathering financial and physical evidence, while considerably fewer lines of enquiry were taken to identify and engage with potential victims. That is, implementing a proactive strategy to engage with victims and, ultimately, gather their testimony, might have been seen as too costly, time-consuming and with little chance of success when compared to the evidence that could be generated through the analysis of the intelligence available in the police system, and the strategies resulted from this analysis (Findley & Scott, 2006).

Different authors have previously identified the challenges and difficulties when dedicating and justifying resources in HT operations (Cockbain & Brayley-Morris, 2018; Farrell et al., 2012; Gallagher & Holmes, 2008; Van der Watt & Van der Westhuizen, 2017), either due to a lack of prioritisation of HT criminality at a force level (Farrell et al., 2012) or the intrinsic characteristics of the offence which can involve large number of victims/offenders and be committed through extended periods of time (Cockbain & Brayley-Morris, 2018). This study found officers relying on heuristics to assess the opportunities for evidence gathering and, in turn, deciding the investigative course of action. In line with previous research (Fahsing, 2016; Shortland et al., 2020; Wright, 2013), we found that investigators from all three operations reflected on past experiences when

conducting certain actions and strategies (and their positive and negative outcomes) to justify their implementation (or lack of it).

Nevertheless, despite the importance of balancing resources vs opportunities to prove exploitation, a particularly novel finding was that the assessment of victims´ risk was a more determinant factor in the decision-making process and, in turn, the implementation of a victim-centred approach. According to police guidance, officers and detectives need to assess the victims' risk and do whatever is possible to eliminate or minimise it (UNODC, 2009). Data reveals that such assessment was critical in the implementation (or not) of victim-centred approaches. The risk assessment of victims in Operation Seine was considered low, which allowed investigators more time to gather evidence to prove exploitation and time to build a victim-centred strategy that was informed by intelligence and acknowledged the potential victims' needs (and involved partner agencies according to such needs). On the contrary, in Operations Thames and Nile, the assessment of victims' risk was rated as high and immediate, leading to time pressures to quickly intervene to both reduce the immediate risk to victims and preserve evidence; such pressures impacted the actions taken around victims safeguarding and their effectiveness.

Previous decision-making research has demonstrated that time pressure reduces the number of potential strategies generated and promotes the overreliance on heuristics when choosing investigative strategies (Alison et al., 2013; Ask & Granhag, 2005; Kim et al., 2020). This could explain why, in Operations Thames and Nile, when victims were identified during search warrants to different addresses, they were taken to the police station. Such an approach might have worked in the past with other crime-type victims. Nonetheless, with trafficked victims, such practice, however well-intentioned, may well reinforce victims' fears toward the police (e.g., authoritarian force, fear of deportation) (Nickerson, 1998), reducing the likelihood of any later rapport building that would be required to gain information from them (Farrell et al., 2012). Instead, what empirical evidence has found is that other strategies, including officers showing empathy and acceptance or police engaging with partners to meet victims' basic needs (Hemmings et al. 2016; Meshkovska et al., 2016; Pajon & Walsh, 2022) are more effective in promoting victims' engagement. Consequently, and paradoxically, the study found that the higher the risk for the victims, the less effective the investigative strategies in engaging with victims and safeguarding them are likely to be.

As our findings in the present study highlight, the uncertainty and dynamic characteristics of trafficking offences make the assessment and management of victims´ risks a highly complex task, as it can change throughout the course of the investigation. Thus, any action taken throughout the investigation will likely impact the reaction of the victims and the suspects. When assessing the risk and the best line of action, officers need to anticipate and predict the likely reaction of the actors involved and the consequences and wider implications of these actions (Ormerod et al., 2008; Shortland et al., 2020). For instance, in Operation Seine the decision on whether to intervene during a covert police operation in the event the level of risk changes (e.g., if the victim is seen being physically assaulted) is based on the predicted impact it would have on the victim(s) (and their level of risk) and the police operation. Likewise, the planning of the victim strategy in Operation Seine for the day of action also considered the risk and the situation as dynamic. Thus, strategies and resources were planned and dedicated in anticipation of the actor´s reaction (e.g., anticipating possible reluctance from victims to engage with the police). Overall, as with previous research findings both on HT investigations (Pajon & Walsh, 2020) and on decision-making (Innes, 2021), intelligence becomes critical for investigative decision-making and, in turn, in securing (or otherwise) investigative outcomes.

Implications for policy, practice and research

Our findings in the present study illustrate the complexities of safeguarding victims of trafficking while maximising the opportunities for the prosecution of those suspected of criminality. The examination of the three police operations involving organised human trafficking crimes has

highlighted the importance of intelligence for effective sense-making and decision-making processes, specifically when assessing the risk and threat and when considering (and planning) opportunities for interventions. Yet, the study also reveals the lack of clear criteria to risk-assess a case of exploitation, identifying differences in how the level of risk is assessed (and treated) at the start of the investigation, as opposed to during the investigations, once a decision has been made on a course of action to take. Our findings highlight that such risk assessment has important implications for the approach and actions taken to safeguard victims. Paradoxically, we found that the higher the risk for the victims, the less likely they will be effectively safeguarded (in part due to the need for a quick response by the police). To minimise investigators' reliance on heuristics when assessing the risk of the victims and deciding upon a course of action, under such time pressures, while maximising opportunities to secure victim safeguarding and evidence gathering, further research is needed. Another area requiring more study concerns that of developing improved risk assessments within the context of HT investigations, while recognising the complexities and particularities of this form of criminality and its victims' profiles, in order to help inform both policies and decision-making policing practices.

Limitations and future research

Despite the value of using case study methodology to contextualise and provide insight into investigative decision-making during HT investigations, the data collected can be argued to present some limitations. Interviews provide a rich amount of data for analysis and interpretation (Mason, 2002; Walsham, 1995). However, interviewees gave their views on decisions taken during the investigation after the case outputs; therefore, they could have responded with what was believed appropriate, logical or expected according to the final outcomes rather than their honest views on why certain decisions were taken (Björklund, 2008; Rogers & Ryals, 2007). Similarly, aspects including memory fallibility when retrospectively recalling information about an event (see Fisher & Geiselman, 1992; Gabbert et al., 2018) can ultimately have an impact on the data collected. To minimise such limitations, we complemented the interviewees' narratives with a review of police files. Yet, because of the nature of some of the police files and the nature of the information that they contain, we could only access those permitted under our level of police vetting. Moreover, during the interviews that were conducted for the present study, police officers were encouraged to look at their investigative notes to help recall information. The data presented does not include descriptive information from the participants, including years of service and experience investigating HT crimes, as gathering such data from a single police force might well lead to the identification of the participants. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that their officer rank would suggest that each participant has significant policing investigative experience and, for some, their leadership of HT investigation teams would indicate that their professional experience is relevant to investigating of these particular crimes. Moreover, we know by police force data record that the force in the study identified more than 100 HT victims per year, which indicates the police force's experience and activity responding to this form of crime. To complement and strengthen the present study's findings, future research should use other methodologies, including 'think aloud' and ethnographic research methods, to capture 'real-time' decision-making to overcome the limitation attributed to the retrospective recalling of information.

Conclusion

The present study provides insights into the complexity of investigating organised human trafficking crimes in which, other than bringing offenders to justice, safeguarding victims and managing risks are also fundamental goals (Stelfox, 2009). The examination of HT cases demonstrates the complexities of deciding which lines of enquiry to pursue and what actions to undertake to safeguard vulnerable individuals while maximising successful outputs for prosecution. The findings identify the assessment of risks, intelligence, and resources as crucial factors when defining the

investigative purposes and approach. Such findings illustrate the importance of intelligence in risk assessment and decision-making processes, but also the need to conduct yet further research.

Notes

1. NCA: The UK agency responsible for developing national intelligence on criminal activity such as human trafficking.
2. NRM: the UK's national framework for identifying victims of trafficking and ensuring that, once identified, victims are provided with adequate support.
3. The names of the operations have been changed, and identifying details removed to ensure anonymity.
4. Day of action: police operation aiming to enter properties to arrest offenders, gather evidence and safeguard victims.
5. Alpha victims: victims with a higher-status role that can involve supervising, manipulating, and even threatening and assaulting their peers (Cockbain & Brayley-Morris, 2018).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethical approval

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the ethics committee of De Montfort University. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

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