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Ways to Improve the Practice of Using Operational search Measures in the Investigation of Crimes Related to Human Trafficking

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Abstract: This paper analyses strategies to enhance the use of operational search tools in the investigation of human-trafficking offences. Monitoring suspected criminal activity, identification of trafficking networks, detection of recruitment, and location of victims are the focus of the study. It has a qualitative research design, legal and analytical. After initial screening, 113 sources were identified, 49 were used for analysis, and 35 and 29 studies were removed due to duplicates and irrelevance, respectively. The sources were organised into a document review matrix (Appendix A) based on geographical context, methodology, key findings, relevance of the research questions and emerging themes. The analysis found four key findings. First, operational search measures work best when they are intelligence-led that is, combining routes, digital platforms, recruitment patterns, business structures and exploitation networks. Second, these measures have direct rights implications as they can be used to identify and protect victims. However, they also have the

potential to infringe on privacy, misclassify, criminalise, and exclude victims from access to support. Third, legal and practical limitations, such as a lack of guidance, inadequate training, corruption, stereotypes, poor coordination and barriers to digital evidence, impede the effectiveness and legality of investigations. Fourth, legal safeguards are needed, as well as trauma-informed policing, procedural justice, rules on digital evidence, anti-corruption measures, financial investigation capacity and organised victim-support systems. The study is important because it links the effectiveness of the investigation to the protection of human rights. It states that operational search measures should not be conceptualised as tools for law enforcement. They must be used and managed as legal, accountable, intelligence-led and rights-protective tools in the realm of human trafficking investigations.

Keywords: criminal justice, human rights, human trafficking, operational search measures, procedural justice, victim protection.

Introduction

Human trafficking continues to be a grave offence and one of the most severe abuses of human rights. It entails exploitation, control, deception, and taking advantage of vulnerabilities (Banarjee et al., 2025; Demeke, 2024). Research indicates that trafficking manifests itself in various ways in various regions. Women and girls are susceptible to trafficking in Bangladesh due to poverty, low levels of education, poor family support, misleading job offers, online trafficking, and vulnerabilities along the border (Banarjee et al., 2025). Trafficking and migration smuggling frequently overlap in West Africa, with migration paths being influenced by violence, misgovernance, insecurity, and lack of opportunity (Anguita-Olmedo, 2025). These studies confirm that trafficking is not a monotypical crime. It varies depending on the social situation, migration patterns, war zones, online worlds, and criminal opportunities.

Human trafficking is a hidden crime, making it difficult to investigate. Factors of control include fear, debt, isolation, violence, immigration insecurity, and psychological pressure (Lazarus et al., 2025; Pajon & Walsh, 2025). Traffickers can use recruiters, transporters, organisers, online advertisers, business fronts, and informal community networks (Hopkins et al., 2024; Leuprecht et al., 2025). Hopkins et al. (2024) demonstrate that sexual exploitation in the United Kingdom operates in an organised ecosystem of organisers, marketers, and buyers. Beyond this, Kjellgren (2025) shows that there are also online and offline network configurations in off-street sex markets, which must be carefully analysed alongside advertisements. The results indicate that ordinary policing based on complaints needs to be supplemented by investigations involving trafficking. They need systematic operational search measures that can help them to detect suspected activity, identify networks, detect recruitment and locate victims.

Operational search measures are important since trafficking cases start with weak, incomplete or indirect information. The availability of intelligence influences the investigation process in organised trafficking cases, the risk assessment, the victim's safety and police resources (Pajon &

Walsh, 2025). In technology-facilitated trafficking, digital platforms bring about new challenges for investigators, as well as new points of police intervention (L'Hoiry et al., 2024b). L'Hoiry et al. (2024a) demonstrate that risk assessment tools can be instrumental in assisting police practitioners to recognise vulnerability and criminality on adult services websites. Traffickers can use social media and algorithmic systems to target vulnerable persons, according to Moore (2024). Such research suggests that operational search practice needs to evolve to digital recruitment, networked exploitation, and covert methods of controlling victims.

Operational search measures are also associated with the rights of victims. Human trafficking investigations should not be restricted to one area of offenders. They also have an obligation to prevent further harm to the victim(s). Demeke (2024) believes prevention, protection, assistance, punishment, and redress are all part of an effective criminal justice response, which should be human rights-based. In the case of Islam (2024), police investigations may only be interested in the severity of the offence and punishment, and the victim-centred provisions of rescue, rehabilitation, compensation, financial assistance, and privacy may be overlooked. Johnson et al. (2025) also highlight the importance of focusing on dignity and respect, voice, safety, equity, and trustworthiness as key elements of procedural justice in policing. All of these studies emphasise that any such operational search measures must be lawful, proportionate and rights-protective.

The other issue relates to the treatment of victims, suspects and other people involved in the investigation. The roles of the parties in human trafficking cases are frequently blurred. Some victims might be forced to engage in illegal activities. Lightowlers et al. (2021) demonstrate that contemporary slavery cases involve distinct categories of victims and offenders, such as males exploited in legitimate and illicit markets, and boys criminally exploited. Necchi and Bradford (2025) also demonstrate that vulnerable migrants who are victims in illegal cannabis cultivation operations can be criminalised rather than protected. Restrictive immigration and crime-control policies can produce a hierarchy of victimhood, as Jovanović et al. (2024) caution. This can mean some victims will be granted protection and some will not, due to migration status or alleged criminality. These findings are significant in the context of operational search practice, as initial investigative decisions may influence whether a person is a victim, suspect, witness, or offender.

Investigations of trafficking are also hampered by legal and practical weaknesses. Criminal justice responses to trafficking can be shaped by stereotypes, a lack of legal guidance, limited capacity and a lack of expertise, according to Cooper et al. (2024). Reis et al. (2022) demonstrate that while police training is beneficial to aid in victim identification, the police can still misidentify victims with reference to age and force indicators. Casino et al. (2022) highlight legal and practical challenges in cross-border criminal investigations involving digital evidence. These studies demonstrate that there is no separation between being effective in investigations and being legal, having safeguards, training and institutional capacity.

There is a need to improve the practice of operational search measures. Responses against trafficking can be ineffective if institutions are not coordinated, if there is a lack of protection options due to corruption, or if protection services are not trusted by victims. Agwu (2025) reveals that

corruption can impact the four pillars of prevention, protection, prosecution and partnership through bribery, collusion, impersonation and the misuse of resources. The forced labour victim of migration might have mixed feelings about police, as police can be both a help and a hindrance (Paterson & Morgan 2025). Jiménez-Lasserrotte et al. (2025) also demonstrate that there is a need for coordinated health, social and legal assistance, confidentiality of interviews, flexible procedure, and culturally sensitive care for migrant women victims. This finding reinforces the need for legal and institutional improvements that enhance operational search measures and better protect rights.

Research Problem

The main research problem is that operational search measures are essential in human trafficking investigations, but their use can be weakened by legal uncertainty, poor coordination, limited training, digital evidence challenges, corruption, and insufficient victim protection. These weaknesses reduce the ability of investigators to monitor suspected criminal activity, identify trafficking networks, detect recruitment, and locate victims. They may also expose victims, suspects, and other involved persons to rights violations during the investigation.

Research Focus

This study focuses on operational search measures used in human trafficking investigations. The selected measures are monitoring suspected criminal activity, identifying trafficking networks, detecting recruitment, and locating victims. The study examines these measures from a legal and rights-based perspective. It focuses on how they can be used effectively without undermining dignity, privacy, due process, victim protection, and procedural fairness.

Research Aim and Questions

The aim of this study is to identify ways to improve the use of selected operational search measures in the investigation of crimes related to human trafficking. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the role and use of operational search measures, including monitoring suspected criminal activity, identifying trafficking networks, detecting recruitment, and locating victims in human trafficking investigations?
2. How do selected operational search measures affect the rights of trafficking victims, suspects, and other involved persons during investigation?
3. What practical and legal weaknesses reduce the effectiveness, legality, and rights-based application of operational search measures in human trafficking cases?
4. What legal and institutional improvements are needed for the rights-protective and effective use of operational search measures in human trafficking investigations?

Literature review / Theoretical Overview

Human Trafficking as a Hidden, Networked, and Rights-Based Crime

Human trafficking is widely examined as a criminal justice problem and a human rights violation. Recent studies show that trafficking is shaped by geography, vulnerability, migration, technology, and institutional response. In Bangladesh, Banarjee et al. (2025) used qualitative interviews with repatriated women and girls. Their study found that poverty, limited education, weak employment opportunities, family dysfunction, fraudulent job offers, digital platforms, organised syndicates, and border vulnerabilities increase trafficking risks. In West Africa, Anguita-Olmedo (2025) used interviews with security officials, humanitarian actors, and academic experts. The study found that trafficking and migrant smuggling converge along migration routes shaped by violence, misgovernance, insecurity, and limited opportunity.

These studies show that trafficking does not follow one fixed pattern. It can emerge through migration routes, conflict conditions, online recruitment, organised sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic exploitation, and community-based vulnerability. Dean (2025) also found that war changes trafficking dynamics and prevention responses. Green et al. (2026) extend this discussion by examining the conditions in which exploitation flourishes. Their concept of a conducive environment explains how disruption, isolation, entitlement, and desperation can create spaces where exploitation becomes more likely.

Operational search Measures and the Investigation of Trafficking Networks

Monitoring suspected criminal activity, identifying trafficking networks, detecting recruitment and locating victims are the operational search measures selected in this study. As per literature, these measures are needed, as oftentimes trafficking is organised, hidden and difficult to prove. Hopkins et al. (2024) explored organised sexual exploitation in the United Kingdom via in-depth interviews with law enforcement officials and adult service website operators. They found that exploitation is maintained by the relationship between organisers, marketers and buyers. The ecosystem is making money and shielding criminals from prosecution. Kjellgren (2025) also explored the online and offline networks in the off-street sex market. Web scraping, social network analysis and principal component analysis were applied in the study. It was discovered that network and geographical features give a more informative perspective to investigations than single advertisements.

Other studies corroborate this network perspective. Tezcan and Maass (2023) created a network interdiction model for the disruption of trafficking with limited resources. Their research demonstrates that intervention has an impact on the ways traffickers adapt and, therefore, must be taken into account when addressing the issue of anti-trafficking action. The researchers analysed beneficial ownership registries and examined the issue of illicit massage businesses, as done by Leuprecht et al. (2025). They have found that data on business ownership is useful for identifying

and interrupting exploitation for money laundering and front companies. Such research indicates that operational search practice needs to go beyond just the visible offender. It should identify the organisers, financial structures, digital traces, routes, and enabling networks. In addition, Kösl et al. (2026) demonstrate that strict lines between trafficking and slavery and forced labour can mean victims of labour exploitation are not identified for formal support, further supporting the need for a victim-centred identification threshold.

Legal framing can cause an objective legal definition of exploitation to be privileged over that of the complainant, which is pertinent to how exploitation is operationalised in classification at the beginning of the investigation process (Sibley & van der Meulen, 2022). Police investigation studies also support the relevance of an intelligence-led approach. Pajon and Walsh (2025) used case studies of organised trafficking investigations in England. They find that investigative decisions are influenced by victim risk, available intelligence, the level of police resources, and the opportunity to obtain evidence. Mitchell et al. (2025) studied law-enforcement practices in child sex trafficking cases in the United States. In their national survey, they identified that having specialised task forces and victim service agencies was linked to an increased likelihood of investigating child sex trafficking cases. These studies reveal that the technique of operational search is most effective when backed up by intelligence, specialised capacity and cooperation with victim services.

Digital Recruitment, Online Monitoring, and Evidence Challenges

Digital platforms have changed the investigation of human trafficking. Traffickers can use social media, adult service websites, false job offers, and online communication to recruit, control, advertise, and move victims. Moore (2024) examined algorithmic exploitation in social media trafficking. The study found that traffickers can manipulate online platforms to target vulnerable people and that current regulation remains limited. Lazarus et al. (2025) used survivor narratives to examine the intersection of trafficking and cybercrime in Cambodia. Their findings identified deception, recruitment, manipulation, forced labour, trading, movement, online scamming, escape, and rescue as major themes. Fraudulent job offers; visa deception, bribery, compounds, and social media fraud were central to the trafficking process.

L’Hoiry et al. (2024b) explain that digital technologies create both opportunities for traffickers and challenges for law enforcement. Their special issue highlights online platforms as spaces of commercial sexual exploitation. L’Hoiry et al. (2024a) offer a more practice-oriented contribution through the Sexual Trafficking Identification Matrix. Their study shows that risk assessment tools can support police reflection when investigating vulnerability and criminality on adult service websites. Sharkey et al. (2025) also discuss computational modelling of trafficking. Their study warns that models can create harm if they rely on weak assumptions, unreliable data, or incomplete concepts. They argue that lived experience expertise is needed to make modelling realistic and useful for policy.

Digital evidence also creates legal problems. Casino et al. (2022) examined cross-border criminal investigations and digital evidence. Their legally oriented study found that legal heterogeneity, time delays, and weak collaboration protocols can obstruct evidence exchange.

Christakis (2020) also examined law-enforcement access to data in the EU-US context. This work is useful for understanding the procedural and jurisdictional difficulties of accessing electronic data in transnational investigations. He argue that biometric processing affects fundamental rights and requires a comprehensive legal framework. These studies show that digital operational search measures must be effective, lawful, proportionate, and properly supervised.

Victim Identification, Procedural Justice, and Rights Protection

Human trafficking investigations are not only evidence-gathering exercises. They are also rights-sensitive legal processes. Demeke (2024) argues that a criminal justice response must be combined with a human rights-based approach. The study stresses prevention, protection, survivor assistance, criminalisation, punishment, and redress. Pinto (2023) also examines the relationship between trafficking, rights, and crime control. The study shows that anti-trafficking discourse often links human rights with penal intervention. This creates tension when coercive state action is presented as rights protection.

The literature also shows that victims may be misidentified or excluded from protection. Reis et al. (2022) studied police discernment of trafficking victims in Pennsylvania. Their findings show that training can improve identification, but officers may still misidentify victims depending on age and force indicators. Lightowlers et al. (2021) used police data from the United Kingdom to identify subgroups of victims and suspects. Their findings show that trafficking includes sexually exploited women and girls, men exploited in licit and illicit markets, and criminally exploited boys. This study warns against simple assumptions about male offenders and female or child victims.

Several studies extend this concern to migration and criminalisation. Necchi and Bradford (2025) examined vulnerable migrant populations exploited in illegal cannabis cultivation in the United Kingdom. Their review found that victims can be treated as offenders rather than protected as victims of modern slavery and trafficking. Jovanović et al. (2024) discuss a hierarchy of victimhood in the context of prisons and modern slavery. Their study shows that restrictive immigration and crime-control policies can exclude certain survivors from support. Landman et al. (2024) also show that human trafficking and immigration control have become increasingly conflated in the United Kingdom. This creates serious questions about human rights commitments in anti-trafficking practice.

Victim-centred justice requires more than formal recognition. O'Connell (2026) compared victims' rights laws in India, Australia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Pakistan, and South Korea. The study found recurring gaps between legal recognition and practical enforcement. Johnson et al. (2025) developed survivor-centred principles for procedural justice in policing sexual violence. Their work highlights dignity, respect, equity, fairness, voice, safety, and trustworthiness. Paterson and Morgan (2025) apply procedural justice to police interactions with migrant forced-labour victims. Their analysis shows that police can be the first visible state response, but trust-building is weakened by crimmigration systems. These studies support the need for operational search measures that protect people during investigation rather than treating them only as sources of evidence.

Legal and Practical Weaknesses in Current Anti-Trafficking Practice

There are a number of gaps in the literature that relate to trafficking investigations. A systematic review of North American and European studies was done by Cooper et al. (2024). Their findings indicate that stereotypes, the absence of legal guidance, limited capacity and poor expertise detract from criminal justice responses. Gaitis (2023) held a study on images of trafficking depicted in official discourses in the United Kingdom. Based on the study, policy discourses tend to be stereotyped and can miss the entirety of trafficker identities. This limits the definition of anti-trafficking activities and may result in unrealistic objectives. Geographic and demographic complexity also poses investigative challenges. Cockbain et al. (2025) analysed the UK phenomenon of formally identified trafficking and associated victimisation. Their geospatial and demographic analysis revealed that trafficking is diverse and not well-defined. The study emphasizes the importance of disaggregated and context-specific response. As for the situation of domestic trafficking, Monastyrova (2026) studied the phenomenon in Spain, Ukraine and the United Kingdom.

The study concluded that the recognition of citizens as trafficking victims is dependent upon type of exploitation, accrediting authority, local interpretation, cooperation and larger political circumstances. These studies indicate that weak categorisation is likely to decrease victim identification, and divert investigative resources. Harm can also be replicated in institutional practice. Clemente et al. (2024) studied anti-trafficking professionals in Spain. They discovered through their exploratory study that outsourcing anti-trafficking systems can recreate violence against assisted persons and professionals. De Vries et al. (2023) also highlight that discussions about commercial sex and sex trafficking can be guided by moral assumptions, vague notions of vulnerability, and traditional approaches to criminal justice that can have detrimental effects on victims. Haynes (2025) adds a postcolonial perspective to international human rights law. The study suggests that treaty bodies can re-create the colonial pattern by their repressive migration policies, raid and rescue strategies, innocent victim narratives, and through lacking intersectionality. Further weaknesses are provided by prosecution, victim cooperation.

This paper investigated prosecution challenges in Nigeria by Okorie and Okeja (2024). They find that it is hard to be a victim-witness in places where victims attribute these perceptions of traffickers: political failure, material dependence and community-oriented trafficking. Islam (2024) analysed the statements of the stakeholders and the documents of police investigation. The study revealed investigations tend to be limited, with a narrow emphasis on punishment and the severity of the offence, and with a lack of consideration for rescue, rehab, compensation, financial assistance or privacy. The results indicate that the legitimacy of legal enforcement may be undermined if it fails to offer protection.

Institutional Improvement, Training, and Rights-Based Reform

The literature calls for a multi-level reform agenda. Reid and Fox (2023) say that there's a need for criminal justice response reform when it comes to both the victims and perpetrators of human trafficking. Their efforts highlight the importance of victim protection and prosecution of traffickers but also recognise potential for victim criminalisation and the failure to address root causes. In his turn, Agwu (2025) provides a Nigerian anticorruption angle. The study revealed that corruption in prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership can be manifested as bribery, impersonation, misuse of donations, collusion with traffickers, and police corruption (Sysoiev et al., 2024). This evidence indicates that institutional reform must not be limited to the procedural but must also include accountability.

Training is also central to improvement. Cameron et al. (2026) reviewed trauma-informed policing and found that reform requires standardised definitions, better methodology, general and specialised training, officer wellbeing, supervision, and communities of practice. Matos et al. (2025) examined professional and stakeholder perceptions in Portugal. Their qualitative focus group study identified underreporting, societal indifference, new technologies, and weak training as barriers. The study recommended stronger legal frameworks, professional training, awareness, and international cooperation. Jiménez-Lasserrotte et al. (2025) reached a similar conclusion in southern Spain. Their interviews with health, social, and legal professionals found language barriers, limited resources, and the absence of protocols. They recommended continuous training, culturally sensitive care, confidential interviews, flexible legal procedures, and coordinated action.

Multi-sector support also improves victim protection. Gibbs et al. (2024) describe how the United States health system developed policies and education on abuse, neglect, violence, and human trafficking. Their work shows that health systems can support identification and referral when procedures are clear. Schoultz and Smiragina-Ingelström (2023) examined access to justice and social rights for victims of trafficking and labour exploitation in Sweden. Their chapter shows that access to justice is tied to victim identification, migration regimes, gendered assistance, and professional support. Yaman Kennedy (2024) examined child-centred anti-trafficking approaches in Italy and Turkey. The study found that children need social protection, legal aid, shelter, healthcare, education, screening, and trained professionals. These studies show that operational search practice must connect police work with legal, health, social, and child-protection systems.

Legal and financial reforms are also needed. Schidlow (2025) examines forced fraud and financial exploitation of trafficking victims. The study shows that victims may be coerced into identity theft, debt, loans, money mule activity, and fraud. This creates long-term legal and financial harm. Leuprecht et al. (2025) show that beneficial ownership registries can help detect and disrupt exploitation linked to laundering through corporate vehicles. These sources suggest that rights-protective investigation must include financial intelligence, survivor support, and safeguards against treating coerced victims as ordinary offenders.

Synthesis and Research Gap

There is strong evidence in the literature reviewed regarding traffic networks, digital recruitment, identification of victims, procedural justice and institutional reform. Research

conducted in Bangladesh, West Africa, Colombia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, Sweden, Italy, Turkey, Nigeria, Canada, Cambodia, Australia, and the United States reveals that the local context and the transnational nature of trafficking influence the nature of trafficking. Qualitative interviews, systematic reviews, documentary analysis, legal analysis, geospatial analysis, police data analysis, computational modelling and case studies all reflect that investigations into trafficking is more than normal 'reactive policing'. There is still a gap of understanding. Current research addresses the issues of trafficking investigation, digital evidence, victim rights, policing and institutional reform. But there are fewer studies that place these themes together in regard to specific operational search measures. The present study aims to fill this void by specifically targeting the monitoring of suspected criminal activity, detection of trafficking networks, detection of recruitment and location of victims. It further draws on a legal and rights based perspective on these measures. This emphasis is significant since operational search measures may have a beneficial impact on the detection and collection of evidence, but may also impact on privacy, dignity, due process, victim protection, and procedural fairness. The study therefore makes a contribution by linking to the investigative effectiveness and lawful and rights protecting practice in human trafficking investigations.

Research Methodology

General Background

This study adopts a qualitative legal research design. The topic requires an examination of operational search measures in human trafficking investigations from a legal, institutional, and rights-based perspective. The study does not measure numerical relationships. It analyses legal and scholarly materials to understand how selected operational search measures are used and how their use can be improved. The study is doctrinal and analytical in nature. The doctrinal element is used to examine the legal meaning, limits, and rights implications of investigative practice. The analytical element is used to identify weaknesses and propose improvements. This approach is suitable because the study focuses on law, criminal justice practice, human rights protection, and institutional reform. The research focuses on four selected operational search measures. These are monitoring suspected criminal activity, identifying trafficking networks, detecting recruitment, and locating victims. These measures were selected because they reflect the early and intelligence-based stages of human trafficking investigation. They are also directly linked to victim identification, evidence development, and protection from further exploitation.

Participants / Sample

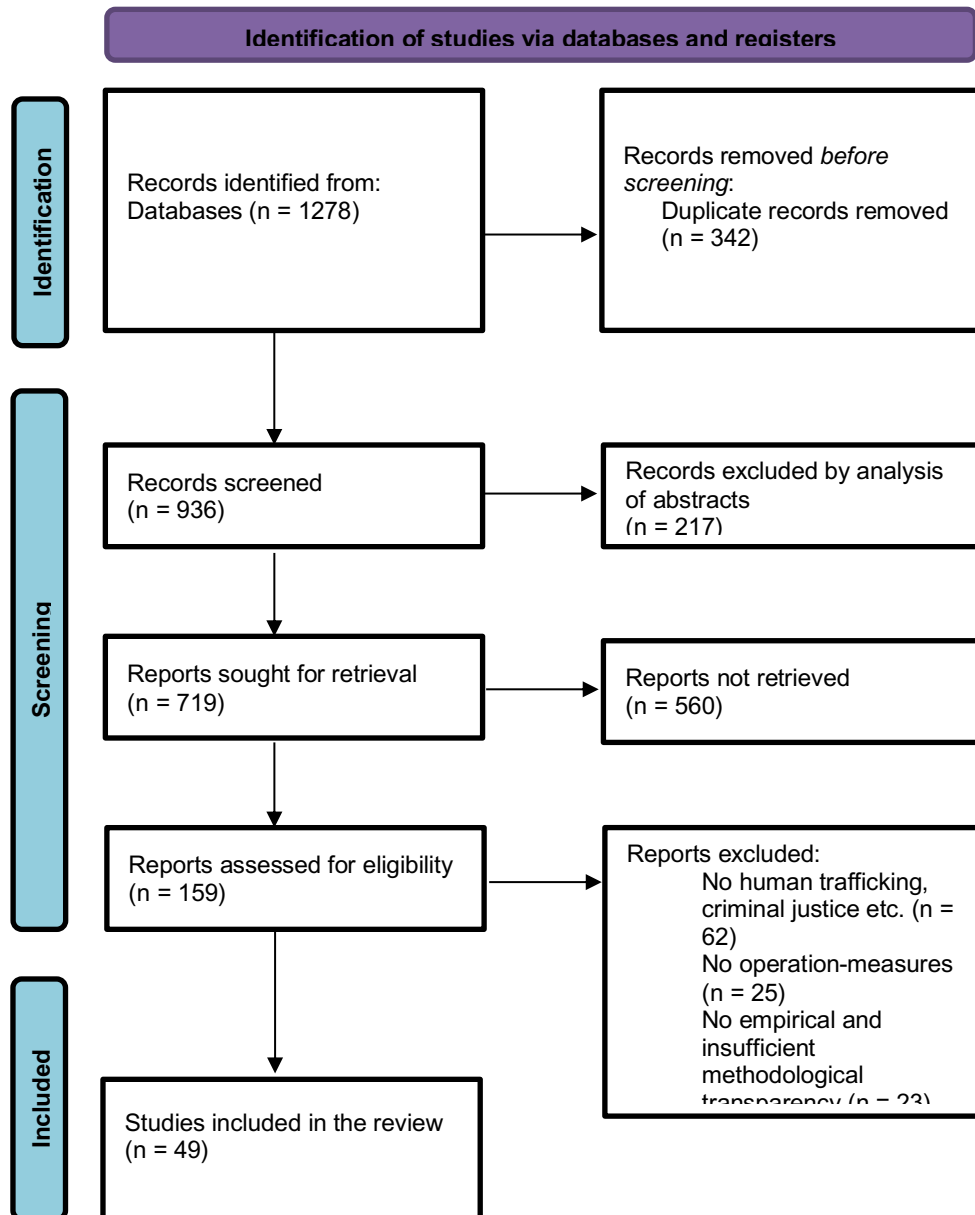
This study does not include human participants. It is based on a document sample. The sample comprises selected academic studies on human trafficking, criminal justice response, victim protection, digital evidence, policing, exploitation, migration, and rights-based reform. The selected sources were used as the closed reference base for the study. The document sample includes recent peer-reviewed studies and scholarly materials published mainly between 2021 and 2026. One earlier source was retained because it addresses law-enforcement access to data and cross-border evidence issues. The selected literature covers different jurisdictions and contexts, including

Bangladesh, West Africa, Colombia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, Sweden, Italy, Turkey, Nigeria, Canada, Cambodia, Australia, and the United States. This geographical range allows the study to compare legal and practical issues across different anti-trafficking settings. The sample includes qualitative studies, systematic reviews, doctrinal and socio-legal analyses, policing studies, geospatial studies, computational modelling studies, and policy-focused research. This variety is useful for a legal paper because human trafficking investigations involve both law and practice. The selected sources also address victims, suspects, law-enforcement agencies, professionals, migrant groups, children, and institutional actors. This supports the study's rights-based focus. The complete document review matrix, including the selected sources, geographical context, method, key evidence, and relevance to the research questions, is provided in Appendix A.

A protocol-based document screening process was used to identify and organise the studies included in the qualitative analysis. Studies were included if they focused on human trafficking, operational search or comparable investigative measures, criminal justice response, victim identification, digital evidence, trafficking networks, recruitment, victim protection, procedural justice, or rights-based reform. Studies were excluded when they were not directly related to human trafficking investigations, did not address legal, policing, institutional, or rights-based issues, were outside the agreed source base, duplicated another selected record, or lacked relevance to the four research questions. As shown in Figure 1, the initial literature search conducted in the selected databases (Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar) identified 1,278 records. After the removal of duplicate records ($n = 342$), 936 records remained for title and abstract screening. At this stage, 217 records were excluded because their titles and abstracts did not meet the predefined inclusion criteria. The remaining 719 reports were sought for retrieval. Of these, 560 reports could not be retrieved or did not provide sufficient information for further assessment. Following the full-text review, 159 articles were excluded for reasons including insufficient relevance to the research topic, lack of empirical evidence, theoretical or conceptual focus, unavailable full texts, overlapping study populations, or language restrictions. As a result, 49 studies met all inclusion criteria and were retained for the final review. The included studies were subsequently entered into the document review matrix presented in Appendix A and systematically analyzed according to publication context, methodological approach, key findings, relevance to the research questions, and emerging thematic patterns.

Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Diagram of Literature Selection



Instrument and Procedures

The main research instrument was a structured document review matrix, which is presented in Appendix A. The matrix was used to extract and organise information from the selected studies. Each source was reviewed according to its geographical context, method, key evidence, and relevance to the research questions. The review procedure followed a staged process. First, the selected studies were grouped according to the four research questions. Second, each study was reviewed for its geographical context, method, key evidence, and relevance to the study. Third, the findings were

compared thematically across different jurisdictions and study designs. Fourth, the evidence was organised around the selected operational search measures. Fifth, the rights-based implications were analysed in relation to legality, dignity, privacy, due process, victim protection, and procedural fairness. The study did not use interviews, surveys, or direct observation. This decision was appropriate because the paper focuses on legal and scholarly analysis rather than primary empirical data collection. The method also avoids ethical risks linked to direct engagement with trafficking victims, survivors, suspects, or investigators. This is important because human trafficking is a sensitive area involving trauma, vulnerability, privacy, and legal risk.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed through qualitative thematic analysis. The analysis focused on recurring legal, practical, and rights-based themes in the selected literature. The first stage identified how operational search measures support trafficking investigations. This included monitoring suspected criminal activity, identifying trafficking networks, detecting recruitment, and locating victims. The second stage examined how these measures may affect the rights of victims, suspects, and other involved persons. The third stage identified legal and practical weaknesses that reduce lawful and effective investigation. The fourth stage developed reform-oriented findings. The analysis also used comparative synthesis. Studies were compared according to geography, aim, methodology, and findings. For example, studies from Bangladesh, West Africa, Colombia, and Ukraine were used to understand vulnerability, migration, conflict, and recruitment patterns. Studies from the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, Sweden, Italy, Turkey, Canada, and the United States were used to examine policing, victim identification, rights protection, institutional practice, and reform. This comparison helped identify common problems and context-specific differences. The analytical focus remained legal and rights-based throughout the study. The study examined whether operational search measures can improve investigation without weakening human rights protection. It also examined whether current practices support or limit victim identification, fair treatment, privacy, access to justice, and protection from wrongful criminalisation. The final analysis was used to propose legal and institutional improvements for the rights-protective and effective use of operational search measures in human trafficking investigations.

Results

The analytical themes were extracted from the document review matrix presented in Appendix A. Each included study was reviewed according to its geographical context, research aim, methodology, key findings, and relevance to the research questions. The extracted findings were first grouped under the four research questions. They were then compared across jurisdictions, study designs, and substantive findings. Recurring patterns were treated as analytical themes when they appeared across several studies or when a source provided strong legal or investigative evidence for one research question. This process produced four themes: the investigative role of operational search measures, the rights impact of these measures, the weaknesses affecting their lawful and effective use, and the legal and institutional improvements needed for rights-protective practice.

Table 1

Themes Extracted from the Document Review Matrix (Appendix A)

Theme	Analytical sub-themes	Relevant Research question
Intelligence-led use of operational search measures	Monitoring suspected activity; identifying networks; detecting recruitment; locating victims	RQ1
Rights impact of operational search measures	Victim identification; non-punishment; privacy; dignity; due process; procedural justice; child protection	RQ2
Legal and practical weaknesses in current practice	Stereotypes; weak guidance; limited expertise; misidentification; corruption; harmful institutional practice; digital evidence barriers; cross-border data difficulty	RQ3
Legal and institutional improvement	Legal safeguards; anti-corruption; task forces; trauma-informed policing; procedural justice; multidisciplinary support; digital and financial investigation reform	RQ4

Source: Author's own development.

Theme 1: Operational Search Measures Support Intelligence-Led Investigation

The first is that operational search measures work best if they are able to detect patterns prior to the completion of the offence file. There were four patterns of investigations that appeared during the document review. These included monitoring based on routes, identification of networks, recruitment detection, and identification of victim locations. The selected operational search patterns in this study were directly matched with these patterns. Route-based monitoring developed out of migration studies, conflict, and border vulnerability studies. The evidence revealed that the vulnerability to trafficking frequently starts prior to the exploitation being identified. Migration routes in West Africa put people at risk of being subjected to criminal governance and exploitation. Organised syndicates, fake job offers, and online recruitment started in the border areas of Bangladesh.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that monitoring of suspected criminal activity should consist of the routes, borders, displacement settings, and recruitment promises. It should NOT be a wait for a formal complaint. The second finding was the identification of networks. The studies didn't depict trafficking as a crime of one perpetrator. They exhibited functional relationships between organisers, marketers, buyers, digital intermediaries and business structures. The United Kingdom evidence on sexual exploitation included the role of organiser, marketer, and buyer. The evidence from the Adult Services website demonstrated that Network analysis is more effective than individual advert assessment. The evidence of beneficial ownership indicated that illicit massage enterprises can be used as exploitation sites or as laundering fronts. What this implies is that operational search should follow relationships, ownership, and movement, digital patterns, and

financial linkages. A third finding was the recruitment detection. The evidence revealed that there are many recruitment opportunities that are camouflaged as opportunities. Fraudulent job offers, recruitment fees, visa deception, and contact over social media were consistently highlighted, as were algorithmic targeting and online scams (Schoultz and Smiragina-Ingelström, 2023).

Survivor stories from Cambodia revealed the interaction of job deception, bribery at immigration, moving between compounds, and forced online fraud. This indicates that recruitment detection needs to be targeted during the apparent consent-to-control transition point. Should explore the transition of promises to debt, confinement, coercion, or forced labor. The fourth finding concerned victim location. The studies examined revealed that intelligence, risk assessment, resources, and service cooperation are the factors for finding victims. It was revealed that case studies of organised trafficking investigations in England demonstrated a need for balance between safeguarding and evidence building on the part of the police. Agency-level evidence from the United States revealed a correlation between child sex-trafficking task forces and victim-service agencies and an increased likelihood of investigation. This means finding victims can be a search not just physically. It is also a legal and institutional process that involves safe referrals, specialised knowledge, and protection planning.

Figure 2

Intelligence-Led and Rights-Protective Operational Search Measures Framework

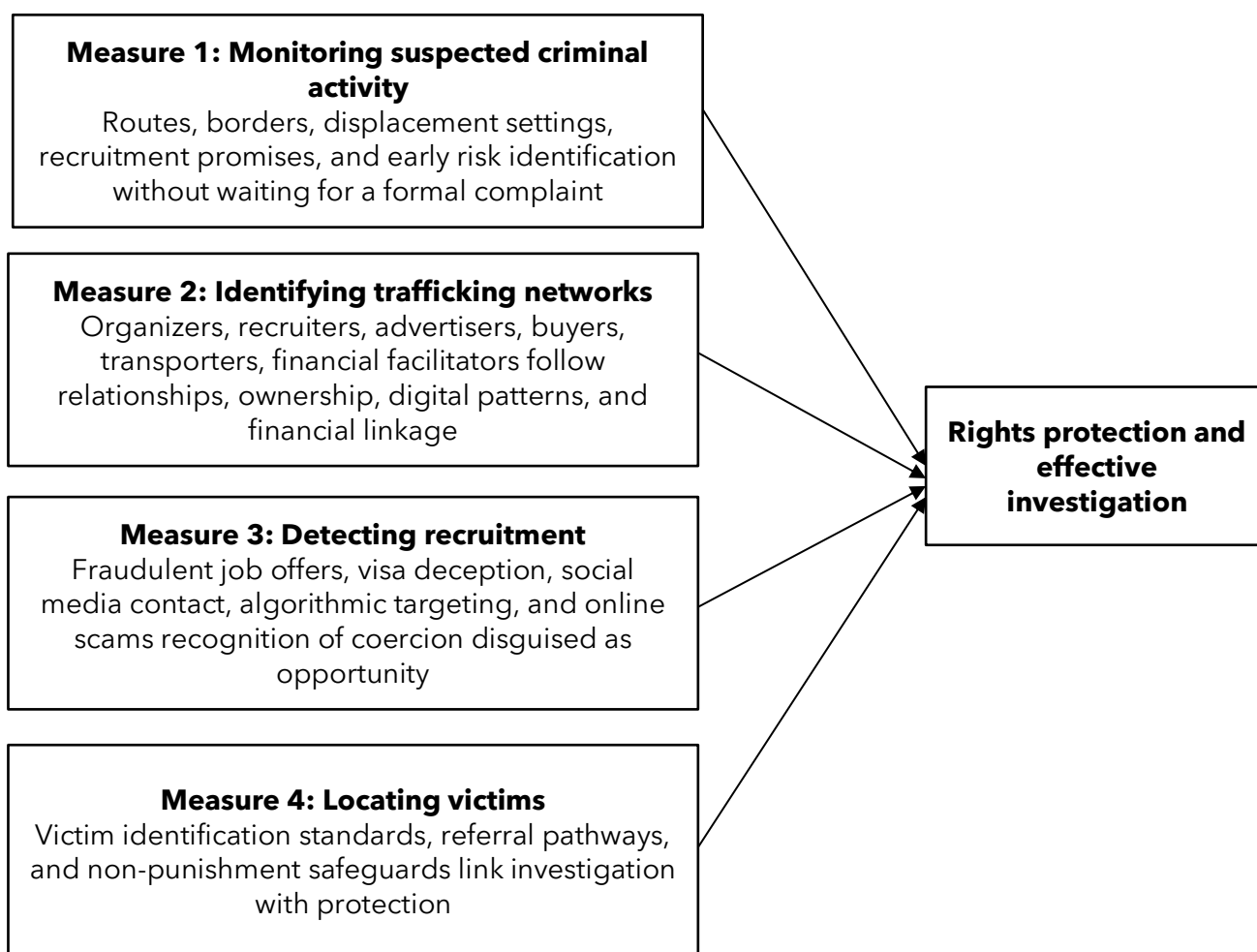


Figure 2 shows the analytical framework that emerged from the findings for the four measurements of operational search. Monitoring suspected criminal activity, identifying trafficking networks, detecting trafficking, and locating victims are all multi-purpose activities outlined in the framework. On one hand, these actions support investigations to identify early signs and signals of risk, trace network connections, detect coerced recruitment, and find victims. Conversely, they help protect rights when used in conjunction with victim identification safeguards, referral pathways, non-punishment safeguards, proportionality, and due process. The figure illustrates the study's main conclusion that the effectiveness of investigations and the protection of rights are interdependent in the context of human trafficking investigations.

Theme 2: Operational search Measures Affect Rights Through Identification, Privacy, Due Process, and Protection

Second, operational search measures can affect rights. Its direction will vary with how it is legally authorised, interpreted, and applied. The review found five areas of right. Those were: victim identification, non-punishment, dignity, privacy, and access to protection. Identifying the victim was the most frequently mentioned rights problem. Evidence indicated that rigid legal categories can exclude victims if using formal identification. In practice, labour trafficking, forced labour and slavery, domestic trafficking and criminal exploitation can overlap. Some may be left outside of protection,

as there is a fine line for determining who is and isn't supported. This is significant since operational search measures frequently result in the first official interpretation of the status of a person. This individual can be considered a victim, suspect, witness, offender, and/or irregular migrant.

The victim-suspect boundary was a second major rights issue. Police data from the United Kingdom showed that victims and suspects of modern slavery are heterogeneous. The same evidence warned against the simple assumption that trafficking always involves male offenders and female or child victims. Other evidence showed that vulnerable migrants exploited in cannabis cultivation may be criminalised instead of protected. Financial exploitation evidence also showed that victims may be coerced into identity theft, loans, fraud, and money mule activity. This means that operational search measures must examine coercion before criminal liability is assumed. Procedural justice was a third rights issue. Survivor-centred policing evidence showed that dignity, respect, equity, fairness, voice, safety, and trustworthiness are central to just police practice. Migrant forced-labour evidence showed that victims may mistrust police because police can appear as both support providers and detention authorities. This finding shows that operational search measures cannot rely only on legal power. They also require respectful communication, safe interviewing, and trust-building.

Immigration-linked exclusion was a fourth rights issue. The evidence showed that anti-trafficking systems may become less protective when trafficking is treated through immigration control. Some survivors may be excluded because of irregular status or alleged criminal involvement. This creates unequal access to protection. It also produces a hierarchy of victimhood. The finding is important for operational search practice because early investigative categorisation can shape later access to assistance, legal recognition, and non-punishment safeguards. Privacy was the fifth rights issue. Digital evidence and facial recognition can support an investigation. They also affect personal data, biometric information, and due process. The evidence showed that facial recognition creates a new biometric quality of data. It requires a comprehensive legal framework before law enforcement uses it. Cross-border evidence also creates problems when legal frameworks differ across jurisdictions. This means that digital operational search measures must be lawful, necessary, proportionate, and accountable.

Theme 3: Legal and Practical Weaknesses Limit Effective and Rights-Based Investigation

The third finding is that operational search measures are weakened by problems inside law, institutions, and investigative practice. The review identified six concrete weaknesses. These were stereotypes, misidentification, lack of guidance and expertise, corruption, digital evidence barriers, and harmful institutional responses. Stereotypes were a recurring weakness. The systematic review evidence showed that stereotypes, absence of legal guidance, limited capacity, and lack of expertise interact and weaken criminal justice responses. Official discourse evidence from the United Kingdom also showed that traffickers are often represented through narrow stereotypes. This affects investigation because operational search measures may follow expected images of traffickers or victims instead of actual exploitation structures.

Misidentification was one particular deficit. Evidence collected by police indicated that in certain situations, training made for better identification. It also demonstrated that there are still factors, such as age and force indicators, that can make officers misidentify victims. This is significant since incomplete indicators are frequently used to detect trafficking. Immediate disclosure of force is not possible by a victim. An older victim might be mistaken for an offender or as a willing participant. This undermines protection and prosecution. There was also weak legal and institutional support. Review evidence revealed that criminal justice actors have responsibilities to detect, investigate, prosecute, identify victims and provide legal protection. The same evidence revealed that low prosecution and victim identification results are related to capacity and expertise issues. This is a finding that shows that there are more than authority in operational search measures. They need clarity in legal guidance, trained police and uniformed standards.

Corruption was a significant institutional problem. It was also discovered that anti-trafficking agencies were subjected to bribery, impersonation, misuse of donation funds, collusion with traffickers, and police corruption in Nigeria. It also revealed that victims' voices and protection were limited by corruption (Sysoiev et al., 2024). This directly undermines operational search practice. Can lead to victim exposure, warning traffickers, skewing evidence, and undermining police credibility. The introduction of digital evidence made another weakness. Through the investigation evidence collected across borders, it was revealed that digital evidence is at the heart of today's investigations. It also revealed that legal variations, time constraints, and impaired cooperation processes are hindering evidence sharing. The availability of the data to law enforcement from one jurisdiction to another also poses additional procedural challenges. This can impact trafficking investigations because recruitment, communication, advertising, payment, and movement records could be outside the Investigating State. The last vulnerability was institutional harm. The evidence from Spain revealed that anti-trafficking systems can perpetuate violence against individuals who are assisted and professionals. Evidence from commercial sex policy also highlighted the potential for harm to victims from moralistic assumptions and traditional criminal justice approaches. This places emphasis on the potential for operational search measures to be damaging if institutions prioritise control, punishment, and rescue over consent, agency, protection, and rights.

Theme 4: Legal and Institutional Improvements Are Needed for Rights-Protective Investigation

The fourth finding is that there is a need for a multidimensional reform model for improvement. There was no evidence that a "purely enforcement" response was appropriate. The document review came up with five concrete directions for reform. These are rights-based legal protections, specific institutional capacity, trauma-informed, and procedurally just policing, coordinated victim support, and regulated digital/financial investigation. Rights-based legal safeguards are the first direction to reform. The evidence demonstrated that the prevention, protection, assistance, punishment, and redress are necessary for the prevention of human trafficking. This is because operational search measures can only be assessed by considering the number of arrests or prosecutions in addition to the numbers. They should also be evaluated on their ability to identify victims and ensure that dignity is respected, wrongful criminalisation is avoided, and remedies are available. The authorisation to

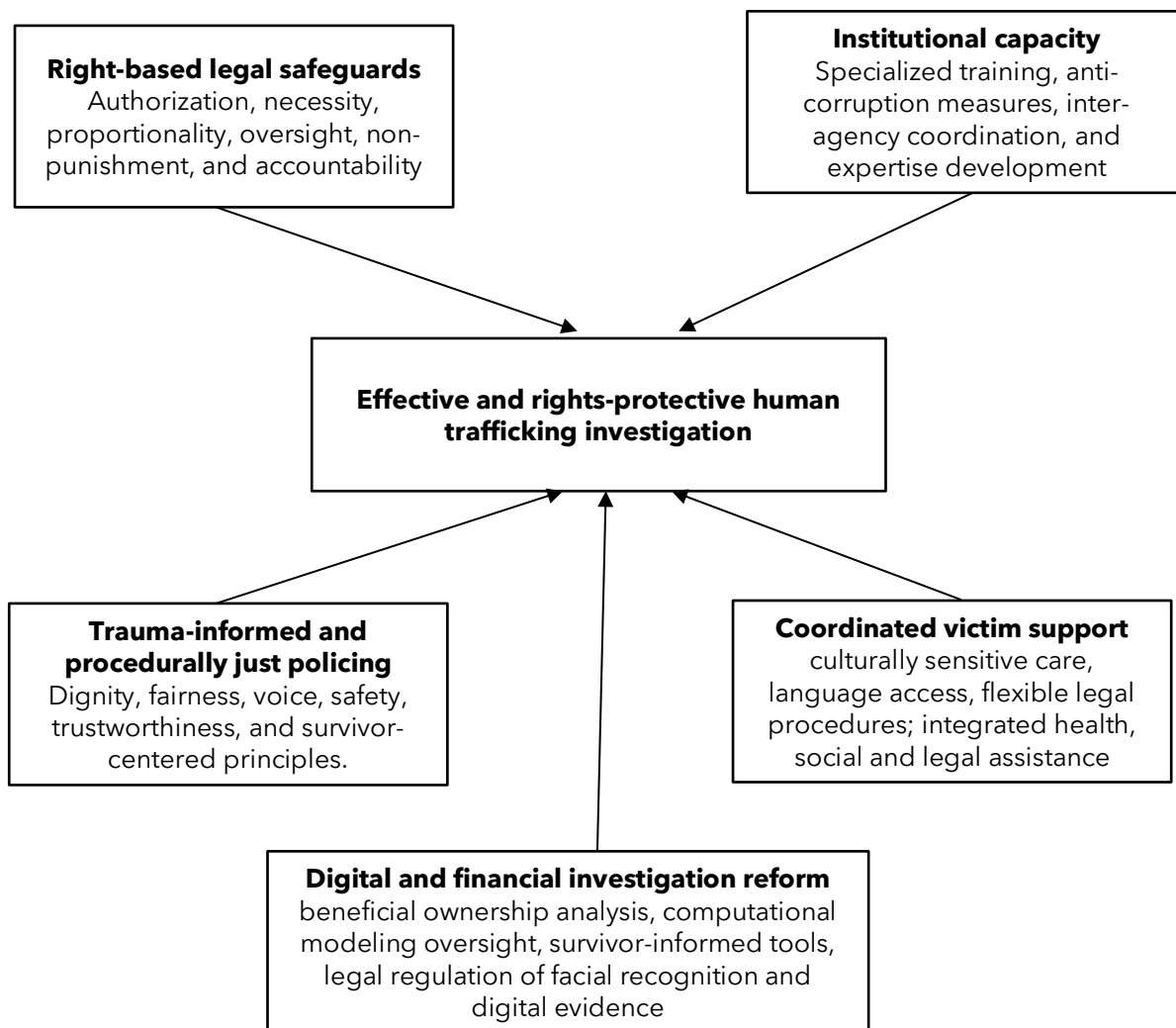
use, the necessity of the assistance, the proportionality of the use, the oversight of the use, the privacy or confidentiality of the assistance, the non-punishment, and the accountability of the assistance must be safeguarded (Agwu, 2025).

The second reform direction is to build up specialised institutional capacity. The child sex-trafficking agency's evidence indicated that there was a link between specialised task forces and/or victim service agencies and an increased risk of investigation. This finding is consistent with research showing that effective institutional performance depends on specialized expertise, coordination mechanisms, organizational capacity, and well-developed governance structures. Strengthening these institutional foundations can significantly improve the effectiveness and accountability of investigative activities in complex investigations, including human trafficking cases (Brunovskis, 2022). Moreover, this finding is consistent with the existence of units that have been established to fight trafficking, trained investigators, victim-service partnerships, and instituted trafficking referral systems. It also indicates that operational search measures are more effective when the police is not using them and are not complemented by other measures. The third reform direction is to create Trauma-informed, procedurally just policing. Evidence showed trauma awareness and sensitivity training, officer wellbeing, trauma-informed supervision, communities of practice, and general and specialised training were all areas identified as a need for trauma-informed policing evidence. The principles of dignity, fairness, voice, safety, and trustworthiness of procedural justice were found to be important. This should be done in a safe way (such as safe engagement, respectful communication, and confidential interviewing), and with a focus on trauma.

The 4th reform direction is Co-ordinated victim support. In Spain, it was found that migrant women victims experience language barriers, lack resources, and a lack of standardised protocols. It called for ongoing training, culturally appropriate health care, flexible legal process, private interviewing, and integrated health, social, and legal assistance. Institutional policies and education have proven to have a positive impact on trafficking responses in the United States, as evidenced by health systems. An evidence-based analysis of child victims' needs identified in Italy and Turkey revealed that legal assistance, shelter, health, education, screening, and trained professionals are crucial needs for child victims. The results in this document demonstrate that operational search measures need to be linked to actual protection pathways for investigations. The 5th reform direction is the digital and financial investigation reform. The amount of evidence of beneficial ownership revealed in the registers is proof that they can be used to uncover exploitation through business fronts and laundering structures. Forced fraud evidence revealed victims could be forced to engage in Identity theft, loans, fraud, debt, and money mule activity. The evidence from computational modelling highlighted that models can be harmful if they have poor-quality data or if they are based on inadequate assumptions. The results of this study demonstrate that digital and financial tools can only be helpful if they are accurate, supervised, survivor-informed, and legally regulated.

Figure 3

Multidimensional Reform Model for Rights-Protective Operational Search Measures



The multidimensional reform model for rights-protective operational search measures used in human trafficking investigations is presented in Figure 3. The figure represents five reform paths that merge into the ultimate objective of an effective and rights-respecting human trafficking investigation. This guidance contains legal protections for rights, institutional capacity, trauma-informed and procedurally just policing, coordinated victim support, and digital and financial investigative reforms. The model shows that enforcement capacity alone is not enough to improve operational search measures. They need to be legally authorised, proportionate, supervised, trained, with anti-corruption systems in place, and also survivor-focused, with integrated support systems and regulated digital and financial tools. The figure thus represents the findings that the protection of human rights and investigative effectiveness are a necessary link.

Discussion

The findings show that operational search measures are not merely technical tools for detecting crime. They are legal and institutional practices that shape how human trafficking cases are recognised, investigated, and resolved. This is important because the selected measures operate in the early stages of investigation, when evidence is incomplete, and the status of involved persons may be unclear. At this stage, a person may be treated as a victim, suspect, witness, irregular migrant, or offender. The way operational search measures are applied can therefore influence both

investigative outcomes and rights protection. The first important interpretation is that human trafficking investigation requires a shift from incident-based policing to pattern-based investigation. The findings showed that trafficking indicators often appear through routes, digital contact, recruitment promises, business structures, and network behaviour. This means that monitoring suspected criminal activity should not wait for a complete victim statement or direct evidence of exploitation. It should identify recurring signals indicating control, deception, movement, recruitment, or profit. This supports a more proactive investigative model, but it also requires clear legal limits to prevent arbitrary surveillance (Agwu, 2025; Cooper et al., 2024; Dean, 2025).

The second is that identifying networks should be the primary concern of operational search practice. Trafficking in persons is frequently perpetuated by related individuals and/or facilitating systems. These can be recruiters, organisers, advertisers, buyers, transporters, business fronts, and financial facilitators. Investigation is less effective if it focuses only on the obvious perpetrator. A more robust approach should account for each player's role in recruitment, control, concealment, and profit-making in the exploitation. This has legal significance, as it can help improve the evidence base and more precise identification of responsibility. The third one relates to the detection of the recruitment. The results revealed that recruitment practices are typically marketed as a job opportunity instead of exploitation (Demeke, 2024). This is particularly evident in fake job offers and employment promises, in contact through online platforms, in visa fraud, in recruitment fees, and in digital manipulation. The problem with the law is that at first may seem consent but in reality may be coercion or dependency. In the field of operational search, therefore, it would be useful to investigate the progression of consent (Landman et al., 2024; Green et al., 2026). They need to know to recognize the difference between opportunity and control, and when movement turns to exploitation.

The fourth interpretation is that the victim's location must be linked to protection. Locating victims is not only about finding where they are. It also requires decisions about safety, referral, confidentiality, risk, and legal status. A victim may be further harmed if operational activity is not connected to support services. This is particularly important for children, migrants, labour exploitation victims, and persons coerced into criminal or financial activity. For this reason, victim location should be treated as both an investigative and protective function. The fifth interpretation is that operational search measures create rights risks when safeguards are weak. These risks include privacy intrusion, wrongful criminalisation, exclusion from protection, retraumatisation, and unequal treatment. The findings showed that victims may be misidentified when investigators rely on stereotypes or narrow indicators of force (Johnson et al., 2025). They may also be excluded when immigration status or criminal involvement receives more attention than exploitation. This shows that rights-based screening should be built into the use of operational search measures from the beginning. This observation corresponds with recent scholarship stressing the importance of human rights safeguards, procedural justice, and the avoidance of hierarchical approaches to victimhood in anti-trafficking practice (Haynes, 2025; Jovanović et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2025).

The sixth interpretation concerns institutional capacity. The effectiveness of operational search measures depends on more than legal authorisation. It also depends on training, integrity,

supervision, inter-agency cooperation, digital evidence capacity, and victim-service partnerships. Weaknesses such as corruption, lack of guidance, limited expertise, and poor coordination can make lawful powers ineffective or harmful. Reform should therefore focus on institutions as well as law. The final interpretation is that improvement requires a balanced model. Stronger operational search powers alone will not solve the problem. A rights-protective model must combine intelligence-led investigation, legal safeguards, procedural justice, trauma-informed practice, digital evidence rules, financial investigation, and coordinated victim support. This balance is the main contribution of the study. It shows that effective human trafficking investigation and human rights protection are not competing goals. They are mutually dependent conditions for lawful and credible anti-trafficking practice. This conclusion is supported by studies demonstrating the importance of reflective policing practices, technological competence, inter-agency collaboration, and specialised expertise in addressing contemporary forms of human trafficking (L'Hoiry et al., 2024a; Lazarus et al., 2025; Leuprecht et al., 2025).

This study has several limitations. In particular, the review was based solely on published academic literature and did not include case files, confidential law enforcement materials, or court records that could provide additional practical information on the use of investigative measures in human trafficking investigations. In addition, despite a systematic search strategy, some relevant studies may have been missed due to database coverage limitations, publication bias, or language restrictions. Therefore, future research should focus on empirically evaluating investigative measures in human trafficking investigations, including comparative analysis across legal systems and institutional settings. Further research could examine the effectiveness of intelligence-based approaches, digital evidence collection, online recruitment detection, and financial investigation techniques in uncovering human trafficking networks.

Conclusions and Implications

The aim of this project was to explore possibilities to enhance the operational search procedures for selected operational search measures used in the investigation of human trafficking related offences. The chosen measures included: monitoring of suspected criminal activity, identification of trafficking networks, detection of recruitment, and finding victims. The study fulfilled its objectives by demonstrating how these measures facilitate investigation, their impact on the rights, the limitations of their application, and the necessary reforms. The first is that an operational search measure most effectively addresses the problem if it is intelligence-led. Routes, digital platforms, business structures, recruitment promises, and exploitation networks are all often forms of human trafficking. By tracking suspected activity, early signs of risk can be identified. By identifying the network, the roles of organiser, recruiter, advertiser, buyer, transporter, and financial facilitator will become clearer. The chance of detection during recruitment provides clues about how the process of becoming an opportunity for coercion works. The victim's location links the investigation to protection and referral.

The second is that there are operational search measures which have direct rights implications. These can have a positive impact on identifying victims and in preventing additional victimization.

They can also do so when they are used in a stereotype, inadequate protective measures, immigration policy, or by making limited victimhood assumptions. This means that rights protection should be integrated as part of the operational search process from the outset. This means dignity, respect for privacy, fairness in the process, fair treatment, protection of children, not being punished, and access to support. The third conclusion is that both the legal and institutional weaknesses exist as a result of the current situation. The use of operational search measures is weak, limited, misidentified, corrupted, hindered by digital evidence, poorly coordinated, and negatively affected by harmful institutional practices. This is its weaknesses can destroy the trust of the victim and weaken the prosecution. They may also result in misguided criminalisation or inaction to protect.

The takeaway message is that operational search measures need to be considered as organized and accountable actions in the eyes of law enforcement. Investigators must be provided with clear legal authority, standards of proportionality, supervisory powers, rules of evidence for digital evidence, and duties to document. They are also required to be sensitized on indicators of trafficking, ID of the victim, trauma-informed practice, procedural justice, and non-punishment safeguards. The institutional implication is that human trafficking investigations shouldn't be done solely by the police. There needs to be a connection between operational search measures and prosecutors, courts, health services, social workers, migration services, child protection bodies, financial investigators, and victim support organisations. This coordination is essential as victims may be at risk if not found in safety.

The Policy implication is that States need to improve the legal and institutional arrangements to better support the use of operational search measures. Anti-corruption measures, privacy protection, cross-border procedures for collecting digital evidence, anti-financial crimes units, and units dedicated to anti-trafficking should all be components of reform. Such changes to the system can enhance the ability to gather evidence whilst safeguarding the rights of victims, suspects, and other parties to the incident. This study is novel from a scientific perspective because it integrates its approach. Pre-existing research tends to focus on trafficking networks or victim rights, digital evidence, policing, or institutional reform, rather than on a combined approach. This study attempts to link these areas with four selected operational search measures. It proves that being effective in investigations is not a conflict with the protection of human rights. They are conditions that are mutually dependent for legal, viable, and successful investigations of human trafficking.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should examine how operational search measures are applied in actual human trafficking investigations across different legal systems. This study was based on qualitative legal and scholarly analysis. Further empirical research could use interviews with investigators, prosecutors, judges, lawyers, social workers, health professionals, and victim-support organisations. Such research would help explain how legal safeguards operate in practice. Future studies should also examine the effectiveness of specific operational search measures. These may include online monitoring, network analysis, financial investigation, border surveillance, risk assessment tools, and victim-location procedures. Comparative research across jurisdictions would be useful because trafficking patterns differ across migration routes, conflict settings, labour markets, digital platforms, and domestic contexts. Further research is also needed on the rights impact of investigative

technologies. Facial recognition, digital evidence collection, algorithmic monitoring, and computational modelling can support investigation. They can also create risks for privacy, due process, discrimination, and wrongful targeting. Future studies should therefore examine how these technologies can be regulated with respect to legality, necessity, proportionality, transparency, and accountability. Finally, survivor-informed research should be prioritised. The voices of victims and survivors can help identify gaps in victim protection, procedural justice, non-punishment safeguards, and access to support. This would strengthen both investigative effectiveness and rights-based reform.

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Conflict of interests

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Table A1

Document Review Matrix

No.	Source	Geography	Method	Key Evidence for Analysis	Relevance to RQs
1	Agwu (2025)	Nigeria; anti-trafficking institutions	Qualitative study	Corruption weakens prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership. Bribery, collusion, misuse of donations, impersonation, and police corruption restrict victims' justice and protection options.	RQ3 and RQ4
2	Anguita-Olmedo (2025)	West Africa; migration routes	Empirical study using interviews and secondary sources	Trafficking and migrant smuggling converge along migration routes. Violence, misgovernance, insecurity, lack of opportunity, and criminal governance expose migrants to exploitation.	RQ1 and RQ3
3	Banarjee et al. (2025)	Bangladesh; women and girls	Exploratory qualitative study	Poverty, limited education, weak employment, family dysfunction, fraudulent job offers, digital platforms, organised syndicates, and border factors increase trafficking risk. Victims experience physical, psychological, and social harm.	RQ1 and RQ2
4	Brunovskis (2022)	identification of trafficking victims	Documentary analysis	Ambivalence, qualms and resistance in social workers' identification of trafficking victims	RQ3 and RQ4
5	Cameron et al. (2026)	Policing; trauma-informed practice	Scoping review	Trauma-informed policing reduces retraumatisation and long-term trauma effects. Reform requires standard definitions, training, supervision, officer wellbeing, and communities of practice.	RQ4
6	Casino et al. (2022)	Cross-border criminal investigations	Legal and practical review	Digital evidence is central to modern investigations. Cross-border evidence exchange is limited by legal heterogeneity, delays, and	RQ3 and RQ4

				weak collaboration protocols.	
7	Christakis (2020)	EU-US law-enforcement data access	Legal analysis	Law-enforcement access to data across jurisdictions raises procedural and legal challenges. Cross-border cooperation is essential for digital investigations.	RQ3
8	Clemente et al. (2024)	Spain; anti-trafficking professionals	Exploratory qualitative study	Anti-trafficking systems can reproduce institutional violence. Outsourced protection services may harm assisted persons and professionals.	RQ2 and RQ3
9	Cockbain et al. (2025)	United Kingdom; trafficking and related victimisation	Geospatial and demographic analysis	Human trafficking and modern slavery are varied and poorly delineated. Geographic and demographic concentrations require disaggregated and context-sensitive responses.	RQ1 and RQ3
10	Cooper et al. (2024)	North America and Europe	Systematic review	Criminal justice actors detect, investigate, prosecute, identify victims, and provide legal protection. Stereotypes, lack of guidance, limited capacity, and weak expertise reduce effectiveness.	RQ3 and RQ4
11	De Vries et al. (2023)	Commercial sex and sex trafficking policy	Critical policy analysis	Commercial sex policy debates are often moral rather than empirical. Traditional criminal justice responses may harm victims.	RQ2 and RQ3
12	Dean (2025)	Ukraine; war and trafficking	Interviews and participant observation	War changes trafficking dynamics and prevention responses. Strong pre-war institutions support response, but victim identification may be delayed.	RQ1 and RQ3
13	Demeke (2024)	Human rights-based criminal justice response	Legal and policy analysis	Human trafficking requires a layered and multi-sectoral human rights-based response. Criminal justice should not focus only on punishment but also on prevention, protection, assistance, and redress.	RQ2 and RQ4

14	Gaitis (2023)	United Kingdom; policy discourse	Discourse analysis	Official discourse often relies on trafficker stereotypes and unrealistic elimination goals. This narrows anti-trafficking responses.	RQ3
15	Gibbs et al. (2024)	United States; health system response	Quality improvement report	Health systems need policies, procedures, and education to identify and support trafficked persons. Institutional procedures support stronger referral and care.	RQ4
16	Green et al. (2026)	Exploitation theory	Conceptual and theoretical analysis	Exploitation flourishes in conditions of disruption, isolation, entitlement, and desperation. The conducive environment model helps investigate exploitation.	RQ1 and RQ3
17	Haynes (2025)	International human rights law	Postcolonial legal analysis	Anti-trafficking law can reproduce colonial patterns through repressive migration policies, raid-and-rescue approaches, innocent-victim stereotypes, and limited intersectionality.	RQ2 and RQ3
18	Hopkins et al. (2024)	United Kingdom; organised sexual exploitation	Interviews with law enforcement and adult service website operators	Sexual exploitation operates through organiser, marketer, and buyer relationships. These roles generate profit and help avoid prosecution.	RQ1
19	Islam (2024)	Anti-trafficking law enforcement	Qualitative stakeholder interviews and police documents	Investigations often focus on offence severity and punishment. Victim-centred provisions such as rescue, rehabilitation, compensation, financial assistance, and privacy may be overlooked.	RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4
20	Jiménez-Lasserrotte et al. (2025)	Southern Spain; migrant women victims	Qualitative interviews with health, legal, and social professionals	Language barriers, limited resources, and lack of protocols weaken support. Confidential interviews, flexible legal procedures, training, and coordinated action are needed.	RQ4
21	Johnson et al. (2025)	England; policing sexual violence	Expert-by-experience survivor panels	Procedural justice should centre dignity, respect, equity, fairness, voice, safety, and trustworthiness.	RQ2 and RQ4

22	Jovanović et al. (2024)	United Kingdom; prisons and trafficking	Legal and institutional analysis	Restrictive immigration and crime-control systems can create a hierarchy of victimhood. Some survivors are excluded from support due to immigration status or criminal involvement.	RQ2 and RQ3
23	Kjellgren (2025)	Online and offline sex market networks	Web scraping, social network analysis, and principal component analysis	Online networks show structural and geographic patterns. Network analysis is more robust than assessing individual adverts.	RQ1
24	Kösl et al. (2026)	Labour exploitation and victim identification	Legal and conceptual analysis	Formal victim identification is complex. Rigid distinctions between trafficking, slavery, and forced labour may exclude victims from support.	RQ2 and RQ4
25	L'Hoiry et al. (2024a)	Technology-facilitated trafficking; adult service websites	Practitioner-academic collaboration using interviews and focus groups	The Sexual Trafficking Identification Matrix supports police reflection when investigating vulnerability and criminality online.	RQ1 and RQ4
26	L'Hoiry et al. (2024b)	Digital technologies and sexual exploitation	Special issue introduction	Online platforms create opportunities for traffickers and challenges for law enforcement. Digital investigation pathways are needed.	RQ1 and RQ3
27	Landman et al. (2024)	United Kingdom; human rights and trafficking	Legal and policy analysis	Post-Brexit conflation of trafficking with immigration control raises questions about human rights commitments.	RQ2 and RQ3
28	Lazarus et al. (2025)	Cambodia; trafficking and cybercrime	Thematic analysis of survivor narratives	Deceptive recruitment, manipulation, forced labour, trading, movement, online scamming, escape, and rescue shape cyber-trafficking experiences.	RQ1 and RQ2
29	Leuprecht et al. (2025)	Australia and Canada; illicit massage businesses	Legal and policy analysis	Beneficial ownership registries can reduce information asymmetry and support detection, disruption, and deterrence of exploitation and laundering.	RQ1 and RQ4

30	Lightowlers et al. (2021)	United Kingdom; victims and suspects	Latent class analysis of police data	Victims and suspects are heterogeneous. The study cautions against simple male offender/female-child victim assumptions.	RQ2 and RQ3
31	Matos et al. (2025)	Portugal; sexual exploitation	Qualitative focus groups	Professionals identify coercion, vulnerability, underreporting, societal indifference, new technologies, weak training, and need for stronger legal frameworks.	RQ3 and RQ4
32	Mitchell et al. (2025)	United States; child sex trafficking investigations	National law-enforcement agency survey	Most agencies use or have access to victim-centred approaches. Task forces and victim service agencies are linked to greater likelihood of CST investigation.	RQ1 and RQ4
33	Monastyrova (2026)	Spain, Ukraine, and United Kingdom; domestic trafficking	Legislative, case law, and policy analysis	Recognition of domestic trafficking depends on exploitation type, accrediting authority, local interpretation, cooperation, crises, and integration processes.	RQ2 and RQ3
34	Moore (2024)	Social media and trafficking	Thematic analysis of existing research	Traffickers exploit social media algorithms to target vulnerable persons. Regulation is limited. Data analysis and machine learning can support disruption.	RQ1 and RQ4
35	Necchi and Bradford (2025)	United Kingdom; illegal cannabis cultivation	Scoping review	Vulnerable migrants may face debt bondage, coercion, trauma, and criminalisation. Protective legislation and criminal justice responses may be inadequate.	RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4
36	O'Connell (2026)	India, Australia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Pakistan, and South Korea	Comparative legal analysis	Victims' rights laws show gaps in enforcement, service delivery, cultural responsiveness, procedural justice, institutional accountability, and victim agency.	RQ2 and RQ4
37	Okorie and Okeja (2024)	Nigeria; prosecution of traffickers	Theoretical and socio-legal analysis	Victim-witnessing is difficult where political failure, material dependence, and community-oriented	RQ3

				trafficking shape victim cooperation.	
38	Pajon and Walsh (2025)	England; organised trafficking investigations	Case studies of police investigations	Investigators must balance victim safeguarding and evidence-building. Risk, intelligence, police resources, opportunities, and victim engagement shape investigation.	RQ1 and RQ3
39	Paterson and Morgan (2025)	Anglophone countries; migrant forced labour	Conceptual literature review	Migrant forced-labour victims may mistrust police. Procedural justice may help build trust, but crimmigration harms remain barriers.	RQ2 and RQ4
40	Pinto (2023)	Trafficking, rights, and crime control	Discourse analysis	Rights-based anti-trafficking discourse is often linked to penal intervention. This creates tension between protection and coercive state action.	RQ2
41	Reid and Fox (2023)	Criminal justice response to trafficking	Introductory reform article	Trafficking is profit-driven, organised, global, and harmful. Criminal justice responses can protect victims and prosecute traffickers, but may also criminalise victims or ignore root causes.	RQ4
42	Reis et al. (2022)	Pennsylvania, United States; police identification	Survey experiment with police officers	Training improves identification in some scenarios. Officers may still misidentify victims depending on age and force indicators.	RQ3 and RQ4
43	Schidlow (2025)	Financial exploitation and trafficking	Policy and social analysis	Victims may be coerced into identity theft, debt, loans, money mule activity, and fraud. Legal and financial support is needed.	RQ2 and RQ4
44	Schoultz and Smiragina-Ingelström (2023)	Sweden; trafficking and labour exploitation	Legal and social rights analysis	Access to justice and social rights depends on victim identification, migration regime, gendered assistance, and professional support.	RQ2 and RQ4
45	Sharkey et al. (2025)	Computational modelling and trafficking	Transdisciplinary conceptual study	Computational models require lived experience expertise. Weak assumptions and unreliable data can	RQ1 and RQ4

				produce harmful policy outcomes.	
46	Sibley and van der Meulen (2022)	Canada; legal framing of exploitation	Socio-legal case analysis	Courts may privilege objective legal standards over complainants' subjective experiences. Legal framing can marginalise victims' lived realities.	RQ2 and RQ3
47	Sysoiev et al. (2025)	Ukraine; institutional governance and administrative legal frameworks	Legal analysis	Institutional effectiveness depends on accountability mechanisms, legal oversight, organisational capacity, and coordinated implementation of public policies.	RQ3, and RQ4
48	Tezcan and Maass (2023)	Nepal road network and modelled trafficking networks	Bi-level network interdiction modelling	Anti-trafficking actors can allocate limited resources to disrupt trafficking networks. Interdiction success is uncertain and must be modelled realistically.	RQ1 and RQ4
49	Yaman Kennedy (2024)	Italy and Turkey; child trafficking on migration routes	Qualitative interviews with experts	Child trafficking violates rights to identity, family, culture, health, nutrition, education, expression, safety, and security. Professionals need training and integrated protection systems.	RQ2 and RQ4