



# Exploring Perceptions of Portuguese Police about Human Trafficking Victims and Perpetrators

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Accepted: 16 September 2021 / Published online: 28 September 2021  
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## Abstract

The present study uses a qualitative approach to explore how Portuguese police perceive human trafficking and the individuals involved. Three hundred and twenty-five professionals (aged 21–54) completed an online survey about human trafficking. The resulting data suggest that Portuguese police have a narrative congruent with the European image of the “iconic” victim and trafficker, which is usually framed by the mass media. In a country such as Portugal, where there are a significant number of labor trafficking cases, those stereotyped narratives may narrow the efforts and the interventions of police officers. However, this study also suggests a similarity between the data reported about the forms of recruitment, exploitation, and control recognized by the Portuguese police and the literature available. This study has important implications for practitioners and highlights the need to invest in empirical research to produce efficient policies and interventions.

## Introduction

Police officers are usually the first to approach trafficking victims, and the effectiveness of their responses has an impact on both crime detention and victim well-being (Farrell et al., 2019b). The criminal justice system faces significant challenges regarding human trafficking crimes. Studies reveal various examples of the impact that professional practices may have on combatting human trafficking (e.g., low levels of identification, lack of victim collaboration; Cunha et al., 2019; Farrell, 2014; Farrell & Kane, 2019; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Farrell et al., 2010, 2015, 2016;

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Hounmenou, 2012; Matos et al., 2018; Newton et al., 2008; Renzetti et al., 2015; Villacampa & Torres, 2019).

Portugal is a unique setting in labor trafficking, with significant numbers of victims and a well-designed structure for combatting this type of exploitation; however, trafficking for other purposes (e.g., sexual exploitation) is lower in Portugal than in other countries, and the numbers of victims identified and traffickers prosecuted are low (U.S. Department of State 2019). Given the potential complexities associated with human trafficking recognition, we report the first study in Portugal about the understanding of police regarding human trafficking victims and traffickers. To achieve this, we first present the main international findings on this subject; next, we establish the pertinence and specific objectives of the present study, the methodology used, the results, a discussion and the implications for practice. The qualitative data collected using a self-administered online survey with law enforcement officers, reveal how police officers understand human trafficking crimes and perceive the victims and traffickers.

Our findings reveal a consistent pattern that suggests that there are some misconceptions and generalizations regarding this crime, as well as the victims and traffickers. Since these officers have the responsibility to effectively respond to criminality, more accurate perceptions about human trafficking and the people involved would contribute to best professional practices, more effective interventions and would prevent revictimization (Cunha et al., 2019). One of the major contributions of this study is the establishment of a starting point for further research in this area. It is necessary to critically evaluate and continue to reassess how our competences and skills regarding human trafficking can contribute to actively fighting this crime in Portugal. We therefore aim to fill a gap in Portugal regarding the lack of studies evaluating human trafficking knowledge and perceptions of police officers, by identifying the most basic issues related to human trafficking for further investigation.

## Human trafficking and social crime framing

Framing theory, as applied to media, conveys that the media's framing of an issue affects how the issue is perceived by the public. Since the turn of the century, the public framing of human trafficking has shifted from not just a human rights problem but also to a criminal justice problem, diverting attention away from complex causes of trafficking such as inequality and poverty (Farrell & Fahy, 2009). However, the media's framing of human trafficking is not simply a reflection of political policies and changes in official responses and problem definitions (Farrell & Fahy, 2009).

For most people, the main source of information about a crime is the one offered by the mass media (Inzunza-Acedo, 2017; Fitzgerald et al., 2002, as cited in Greer & Reiner, 2015). The ways that the media frame crime have a real impact on people's understanding of crime and what actions are required to fight it (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018), as well as on their comprehension of the resulting crime policies (Beckett & Sasson, 2004, as cited in Greer & Reiner, 2015). For instance, the American Reagan administration painted African American crack/cocaine dealers

as villains, instilling fear among the middle-class and contributing to racial stereotypes. Ultimately, this led to a wave of support for the infamous and racially charged “tough on crime” policies that led to the mass incarceration of African American men (Hagan, 2010, as cited in Austin, 2016). According to literature, the media tends to overdramatize the nature and amount of crime and to give, for example, more attention to crimes involving African Americans and Latinos as offenders and Caucasians as victims (Barkan, 2013). Given the absence of reliable data, human trafficking is also similarly framed through media coverage, government reports, and public awareness campaigns (Dragiewicz, 2015, as cited in O’Brien, 2019).

Human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation has traditionally been overrepresented in the international and national media (Couto et al., 2012; Farrell & Fahy, 2009; Sobel, 2014), usually through cases involving women and children, as such stories effectively grab the media’s attention and fit audiences’ perceptions of victimization (Austin, 2016; Krsmanovic, 2016). This narrative creates the image of a “iconic victim” (see also Srikantiah, 2007), which can vary depending on different realities. For example, although human trafficking affects all types of people (men, women, children of all ages, legal and undocumented residents; Clawson & Dutch, 2008; UNODC, 2016, 2018), in the US, the “iconic” victim is seen as a passive, white, young female victim who has been lured or forced into trafficking by organized criminal networks (Farrell & Fahy, 2009; Srikantiah, 2007). In Europe, however, this “iconic” victim is generally portrayed as an innocent young girl from a foreign country who is manipulated, lied to, and often kidnapped and forced into prostitution by a transnational and very violent organized criminal group (Rodríguez-López, 2018). The research regarding this issue is lacking in Portugal; however, in a study developed by Couto et al. (2012), the authors found a predominance of human trafficking stories in the media for sexual exploitation purposes, where victims were typically qualified for their status as women and illegal immigrants. For those authors, “fruit of a culture where discrimination based on gender persists, human trafficking will thus be constructed as yet another product of these inequalities” (Couto et al., 2012, p. 243). Additionally, the same results favor a public understanding of human trafficking as a widely organized, violent and closely related phenomenon with other crimes (e.g., illegal immigration, prostitution; Couto et al., 2012).

Trafficking has also traditionally been seen as a synonym for illegal immigration (Rodríguez-López, 2018). Indeed, trafficking takes many forms and is often confused with other similar crimes such as illegal immigration. The difference between typical undocumented immigrants and trafficking victims is that the latter are influenced not only by “push” factors (e.g., a disrupted family structure, economic difficulties, social or gender discrimination, residence in a vulnerable or dangerous area, political instability, support systems, and feelings of gender inadequacy; Bales, 2007; Clawson & Dutch, 2008; Clawson et al., 2009; European Commission, 2015; Europol, 2016; Rosenblatt, 2014) but also by the actions of another person (the trafficker). Furthermore, the term “trafficking” does not require the crossing of international borders or even within-country transportation (Bassiouni et al., 2010), which means that victims may be exploited even in their own houses.

In turn, the “iconic” trafficker is portrayed everywhere as a violent, skilled and sophisticated male who carefully selects and masterfully manipulates his victims and is more than likely from an ethnic-based organized crime group (Austin, 2016; Cockbain, 2018). This also raises some problems; for example, even though in some criminal groups, women play a significant role in the trafficking process, they are primarily portrayed in anti-trafficking policies as victims and are not usually associated with the perpetrating side of human trafficking. Additionally, while human trafficking has been framed as a serious and organized crime, reinforcing the idea of an ideal perpetrator (Farrell & Fahy, 2009; Viuhko, 2018), this framing pays little attention to other important players (De Vries, 2018), such as friends, family members and intimate partners, who do not necessarily belong to a criminal organization (De Chesnay, 2013; Viuhko, 2018). There are also cases in which traffickers were themselves former victims. A study conducted in India with 160 traffickers found that approximately 37.5% had been victims of sexual exploitation and were generally women who had become too old to attract clients (Sean & Nair, 2006). As Feingold (2005) stated, “traffickers are as varied as the circumstances of their victims” (p. 28), suggesting that their profile varies depending on the victim’s profile and what the trafficker is seeking. For example, a child may be recruited into armed conflict as a soldier by someone his own age.

Since the framing of the ‘problem’ of trafficking is a key factor in the development of responses at the national and international level (O’Brien, 2019), cases that do not fall into these frames and narratives (e.g., the “iconic” victim and trafficker) are largely left out of anti-trafficking discourses and are possibly not identified by police officers.

### **Police perceptions about human trafficking**

As indicated by previous research, police officers seem to use knowledge and perceptions acquired through the media to understand the elements that characterize human trafficking, when they had no access to specialized training about the phenomena (Farrell & Fahy, 2009). That can lead to inaccurate perceptions that can affect the way that anti-trafficking laws are interpreted and implemented (Farrell et al., 2008). Research suggests that while police officers acknowledge that human trafficking is a social problem, they are usually unaware of whether they have jurisdiction over this type of crime (Farrell et al., 2010, 2014; Newton et al., 2008) and if it is a problem within their community (Farrell, 2014; Farrell et al., 2010; Renzetti et al., 2015). These professionals are not familiar or clear on what signs to look for or how to approach or engage a potential victim, nor are they sure of the necessary evidence or legal elements to prove that a trafficking crime occurred (Farrell & Kane, 2019; Farrell et al., 2016, 2019a; Matos et al., 2018).

Similar to law enforcement and legal professionals in other countries (e.g., US), Portuguese professionals seem to struggle with questions regarding the needs, rights, and characteristics of trafficking victims and traffickers (Cunha et al., 2019), lacking knowledge of what procedures to adopt or how to elevate the cases of human trafficking victims (Fernandes, 2012). In the case of justice professionals, for example,

the legal evidence necessary to prove labor exploitation is often unclear or untested, and as a result, law enforcement is more reluctant to pursue these investigations (Matos et al., 2018). Nevertheless, these professionals revealed the ability to adopt proactive practices, good knowledge of the modus operandi of human trafficking networks in light of art. 160<sup>a</sup> of the Portuguese Penal Code, and recognition of the victim as an especially vulnerable person (Matos et al., 2019).

Another important element is the training about human trafficking received and its implication for practices. As reported by some authors, the lack of training on investigating such crimes is a problem (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Farrell et al., 2010; Hounmenou, 2012), which researchers suggesting that it is associated with a general misunderstanding of the problem and may thus explain the small number of human trafficking cases identified (Cunha et al., 2019; Farrell et al., 2010, 2015; Renzetti et al., 2015; Villacampa & Torres, 2019). Additionally, without general training regarding this type of exploitation, law enforcement cannot develop investigations that support successful prosecutions (Farrell et al., 2019b). In prior research on Portugal, professional knowledge about human trafficking appeared to be influenced by training regarding this phenomenon, being a powerful predictable variable for greater human trafficking knowledge (Cunha et al., 2019).

It is generally acknowledged that human trafficking experiences have an impact on the well-being of victims (see for example Ottisova et al., 2018). In a two-year multi-country study with female victims and law enforcement professionals, Zimmerman et al. (2003) found that despite existing congruences between the violence and abuses described by authorities and those in the literature (e.g., the restrictive economic, social and health conditions in which the victims live and the dangers victims face when contacting the authorities), the professionals did not identify the health and mental well-being of victims as a priority (Zimmerman et al., 2003). In the same study, most victims reported that, while under the custody of the authorities, conditions were “horrible”. This can be seen as a barrier that inhibits help-seeking because when victims believe that they have been treated respectfully by law enforcement, they are more likely to cooperate with the police (Koster et al., 2016).

## The current study

The current study seeks to understand how police officers perceive trafficking victims and traffickers. The research questions posed were as follows: How do police officers describe and perceive trafficking victims and human traffickers? Based on their perceptions, which characteristics do they most associate with these victims and traffickers? Is training associated with an undifferentiated profile (‘can be anyone’)? To answer these questions, we analyzed qualitative data from two short online self-report questions with two law enforcement agencies. The focus was on gaining insights into and familiarity with the most basic issues related to human trafficking for further investigation. Only after a general diagnostic process can we advance towards more in-depth studies, which could include interviews and focus groups with professionals to better capture human trafficking knowledge and perceptions.

## Method

### Participants

This study was part of a major project about the perceptions of human trafficking in which 354 police officers answered an online survey (please see Cunha et al., 2019). A convenience sampling system was used, and participants were recruited from two law enforcement agencies in Portugal: the National Republican Guard (GNR) and the Public Security Police (PSP). While most labour market exploitation is handled by the Portuguese Immigration and Borders Service and the Working Conditions Authority, the Portuguese law enforcement is included in the national guidelines and policies for human trafficking combat, responsible for the identification and signalization of human trafficking victims.

For the purpose of this study, we considered only the 325 participants who provided valid answers to the two open-response questions. Answers with missing data or invalid responses were excluded (e.g., blank responses, random characters). We had no access to the number of professionals contacted, so we could not calculate a rate of response for this study. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 54 years ( $M=36.74$ ,  $SD=7.6$ ). Most of the participants were male 89.2% ( $n=290$ ), with an average professional experience of 14.42 years ( $SD=7.75$ ), ranging from 1 to 36 years. Table 1 shows a detailed description of the sample.

### Procedure and data collection

Approval for the study was granted by the Subcommittee on Ethics for Social and Human Sciences of the University of Minho, the GNR, and the PSP. Official websites were used to contact the general command of the GNR and PSP; both agencies replied to our request and agreed to participate. Surveys were first sent to the general command of both agencies and then randomly disseminated by them among police officers using the Survey Creator Program. Via informed consent, all participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time with no negative repercussions. Finally, confidentiality was guaranteed. Data were collected between February 1 and May 5, 2016. The average response time for the entire survey was 20 min and 31 s.

Data were collected using a self-administered online survey titled the Human Trafficking Knowledge Survey (Cunha et al., 2016; see Cunha et al., 2019 for a detailed description of the instrument). This survey collected the participants' sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., age, professional experience, gender, level of education) and evaluated the type of training in the area (e.g., classes about human trafficking, self-directed learning through reading newspapers or a book or first-hand experience) through 25 statements (answered with 'false', 'true' or 'do not know') about human trafficking and two short-answer questions: 'What is, in your opinion, a human trafficker profile?' and 'What is, in your opinion, a human trafficking victim profile?'. These two questions had a free-response field with no limit on the number

**Table 1** Socio-demographic description of the sample

Description of the sample	<i>n</i> = 325 (%)
Sex	
Male	290 (89.2)
Female	35 (10.8)
Marital status	
Married/non-marital partnership	218 (67.1)
Single	91 (28)
Divorced/separated/widower	16 (4.9)
Self-rated socioeconomic status	
Medium	179 (55.1)
Medium/low	105 (32.3)
Low	29 (8.9)
Medium/high	10 (3.1)
High	2 (0.6)
Nationality	
Portuguese	324 (99.7)
Other	1 (0.3)
Resident region	
Center	161 (49.5)
North	111 (34.2)
Lisbon	26 (8)
Alentejo	15 (4.6)
Algarve	12 (3.7)
Education	
High school	205 (63.1)
Basic education	72 (22.2)
Higher education	48 (14.8)
Previous training in human trafficking	
I saw mass media campaign(s) about human trafficking	134 (41.2)
I had a class/lecture that specifically focused human trafficking at school/university	63 (19.4)
Human trafficking was addressed in several subjects at school/university	20 (6.2)
I learned about human trafficking by reading on my own initiative	63 (19.4)
I participated in a training/awareness campaign about human trafficking	105 (32.5)
I work directly with this crime (e.g., with victims)	13 (4)
I never had contact with this theme	66 (20.3)

of characters; the participants answered freely, mentioning the characteristics that made sense to them.

This survey was used with the goal of making the results transversal not only to different groups but also to different countries. Our instrument was developed to fill a gap in Portugal regarding the lack of a specialized tool for evaluating human trafficking knowledge and perceptions within different professional groups. Furthermore, this

instrument also allows us to identify specific needs among individuals within a specific field/professional entity. The instrument fits with the exploratory design, as there are no earlier studies in Portugal addressing our research problem.

### Data coding and analysis

Data from the two short-answer questions were uploaded into NVivo 10, a qualitative data analysis software package for coding and analysis. Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis methodology, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An initial coding grid based on the literature (e.g., sociodemographic data, vulnerabilities, modus operandi) was used to guide the initial coding that was refined as we became familiar with the data and inductive codes emerged. This step was performed independently by the first author. To ensure data reliability, the first and second authors independently coded 30% of the data; the fidelity rate was calculated using Vala's (1986) formula ( $F = 2(C1, 2) / (C1 + C2)$ ) with a result of 0.94. Coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved by consensus. A senior researcher (the third author) audited the coding process. The first author, who was a PhD student in applied/justice psychology and a researcher at the time of the coding, and a colleague from the same research team, who was a research fellow with a PhD in applied/justice psychology, both coded the data. The last author, a psychology professor with a PhD in applied/justice psychology, audited the coding procedure.

The final coding grid included three key themes, subdivided by secondary themes (please see Fig. 1 for an overview of the themes and frequency response). A number of themes emerged from the data, and interpretative work was necessary to identify them. Features that did not fit in identified patterns were explored as negative cases. These themes are explored in more detail below, and direct quotations from data that highlight particular aspects can be found throughout the text.

### Findings

First, to guarantee the richness of the data, the content and number of words typed were analyzed for each participant and each answer. Thirty-one (10% in the first question) and 47 professionals (almost 15% in the second question) gave answers such as "unknown" or "I don't know". In the remaining qualitative answers clarifying how police officers perceived trafficking victims and traffickers, the number of words used ranged from 1 to 116 ( $M = 16.13$ ,  $SD = 17.17$ ) for the victim question and from 1 to 129 ( $M = 15.45$ ,  $SD = 16.91$ ) for the trafficker question. Three key themes emerged from these answers clarifying how police officers perceived trafficking victims and traffickers and the different dynamics associated with this crime.



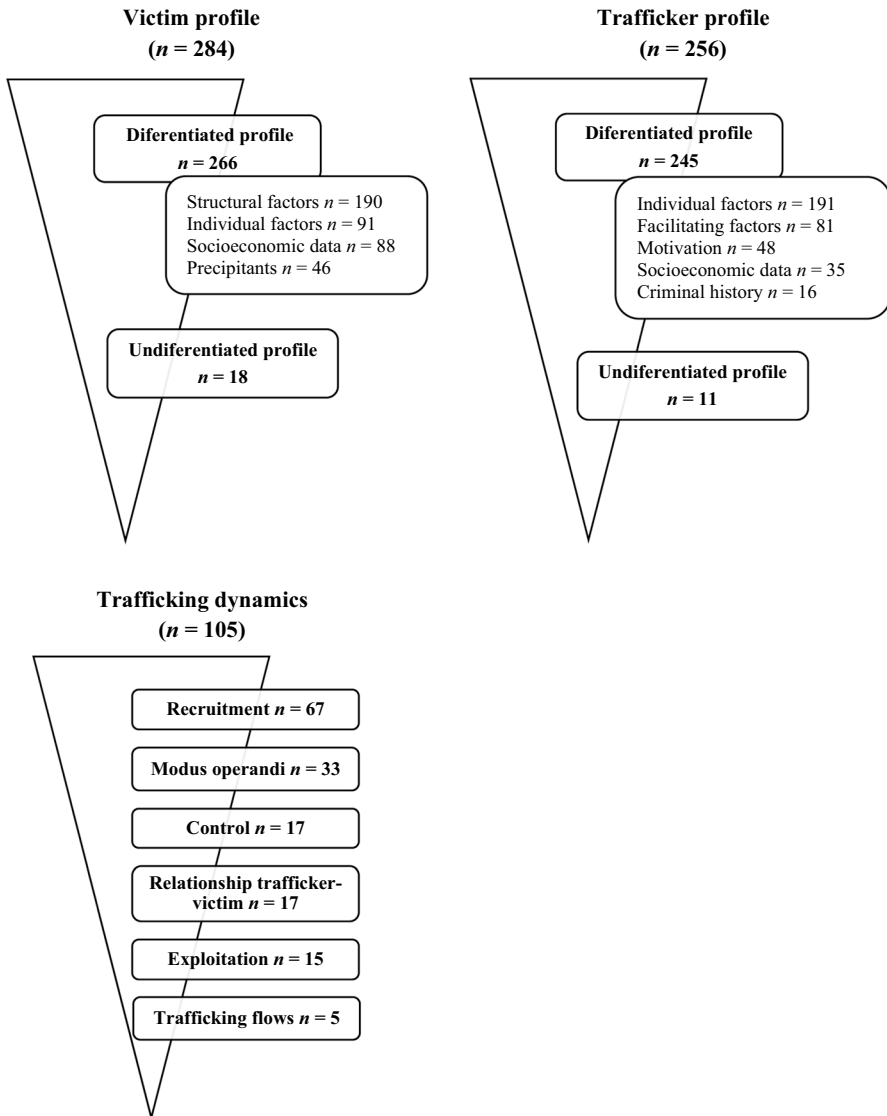


Fig. 1 Overview of the themes and response frequency for each key and secondary themes

## Key theme 1: the human trafficking victim profile as perceived by police officers

### Diferentiated profile: the target is constructed as an “iconic” victim

When asked to freely describe trafficking victims, most police officers listed specific risk factors for being trafficked and mentioned that those individuals are usually young women who are extremely vulnerable because of individual and socioeconomic factors.

Police officers perceived the victim as someone from a low socioeconomic background, living in an area with a lack of opportunities (e.g., employment), poor living conditions, gender inequality, social exclusion or lack of social support, and political instability (*“The victim will be particularly vulnerable due to his/her low economic/financial situation (...) Social problems associated with social exclusion (...) lack of social control (family, school, support networks, etc.)”*); law enforcement officer from Braga, 39 years old). These narratives may favor a preconceived idea of a relationship between both poverty and social instability and trafficking. Police officers added undocumented immigrants and minorities as groups at a high risk of being trafficked. For the police officers, a trafficking victim shows signs of emotional and psychological fragility, is easily influenced and unable to perceive the danger faced and potentially reveals mental or physical problems. This group of professionals also perceived the victim as having a low level of family support and living in poor conditions before being trafficked. When the police officers used sociodemographic data to describe the victim, they often used the same narrative and describe a woman—or, less commonly, a man—who is young, from a poor or developing country, with a low level of education and unemployed (*“Usually, an individual with a low education level (...) unemployed”*); law enforcement officer from Castelo Branco, 40 years old). To escape from unbalanced situations and improve their living conditions, victims pursue and accept such proposals (*“...she needs the money and goes looking for a new opportunity”*); law enforcement officer from Braga, 26 years old). In sum, despite possessing a collective awareness that human trafficking is often exacerbated by individual and socioeconomic problems, these narratives may contribute to the perception of a foreign victim who is extremely vulnerable and pursuing better living conditions..

### **Undifferentiated profile: anyone can be a victim of human trafficking**

Though most participants reported one or more characteristics associated with trafficking victims, a smaller proportion of these professionals understood that, in certain circumstances, anyone can be a victim (*“...there is no profile (...) I believe that anyone can be a target, being in the wrong place at the wrong time”*); law enforcement officer from Santarém, 47 years old), although they may have certain characteristics that increase the likelihood of becoming a victim (*“...although most of them come from poor and struggling countries, there are also victims from all sectors and geographical locations”*); law enforcement officer from Viseu, 39 years old). When crossing these types of responses with the type of training, we learned that most participants (72,2%) reported having some training about human trafficking, reinforcing the importance of professional and personal formation on this subject.

### **Key theme 2: the human trafficker profile as perceived by police officers**

#### **Differentiated profile: the perpetrator is constructed as an “iconic” trafficker**

When asked to freely describe a human trafficker, most police officers listed specific characteristics and mentioned that these individuals show signs of psychological

instability, are skilled at gaining victims' trust and have a prior criminal history and access to a group of facilitating factors. For example, police officers described traffickers as people with psychopathic traits who are ambitious, emotionally disturbed, or astute ("*...organized, meticulous, patient, scheming*"; law enforcement officer from Leiria, 26 years old). However, in their first interactions with victims, they seem to be caring and even kind people ("*Early in the process is a caring person*"; law enforcement officer from Aveiro, 48 years old). Police officers identified internal motivations to enter into these criminal schemes, the most common being profit ("*...aims to get money quickly and easily*"; local law enforcement officer, 40 years old), being associated with prior criminal behavior ("*...generally associated with other crimes (...) arms trafficking, drugs, document falsification...*"; law enforcement officer from Castelo Branco, 40 years old). These professionals also pointed out a range of facilitating factors that may ease their involvement in this type of crime, such as access to money, information about the country and the victim's needs, ease of movement, and social skills such as effective communication and persuasion ("*People who show signs of assets and wealth (...) well placed socially and financially (...) knowledge in social networks (...) of different countries' legislations (...) Observant and alert (...) especially with similar personalities or police*"; local law enforcement officer, 40 years old). In sum, when investigating a human trafficking situation, police officers might tend to look for individuals who seem well established within society, educated and socially involved. This is also observed when police officers use sociodemographic data to describe the human trafficker: a male adult—or, less commonly, a female adult—who is educated and self-employed.

### **Undifferentiated profile: anyone can be a trafficker of human trafficking**

Though most participants reported one or more characteristics that they understood to be associated with human traffickers, a smaller fraction of these professionals understood that anyone can be a trafficker ("*Anyone can have this profile (...) a doctor or a beggar, anyone can be [a trafficker]...*"; local law enforcement officer, 30 years old). Indeed, one participant even mentioned that "*anyone can be [one] (...) they are concealed within society*" (local law enforcement officer, 47 years old), making them very difficult to identify and fight. When crossing these types of responses with the type of training, we learned that most participants (72.7%) reported having some training about human trafficking, reinforcing the importance of professional and personal formation on this subject.

### **Key theme 3: Trafficking dynamics**

Most participants listed specific trafficking dynamics and believe that the trafficker is often someone known to the victim and integrated into an organized criminal network with different trafficker functions ("*...the perpetrators are criminal associations (...) each has a specific role in the recruitment, control, and supervision of victims*"; local law enforcement officer, 39 years old), taking advantage of the vulnerability and fragility of their victims and using romantic promises, promises

of better life conditions, force or abduction, and (false) employment proposals (“... individuals who ‘seduce’ them with better jobs (...) threaten, use force or coercive means, and use people with vulnerabilities to achieve their goals”; local law enforcement officer, 34 years old). While these aspects are very illustrative and important, these quotes illustrate that at a minimum, law enforcement is aware of some common trafficker characteristics associated with organized criminal networks, though possibly neglecting individual operations.

In addition, police officers noted several different dynamics and “red flags” or circumstances that potentially indicate human trafficking. Despite the tendency to describe the victim as a foreigner, police officers also recognized that a victim can be exploited within his/her own country/region or can be transported to another country (“A person (...) who travels to another country or even within his own”; local law enforcement officer, 29 years old) and exposed to various forms of exploitation, such as sexual exploitation, forced labor, begging, or organ trafficking (“... begging, sexual and labor exploitation, or organ trafficking...”; local law enforcement officer, 39 years old). Some police officers associated the form of exploitation with gender or age; for example, they linked sexual exploitation with women and adolescents and forced labor with men. Such associations may lead to failure in identifying other types of dynamics. Finally, they also mentioned means of control that can be seen as “red flags”, such as psychological abuse, physical abuse, the confiscation of personal identification and the victim always being accompanied by someone (“*The documentation: travel or identity documents held by third parties, the transport: always accompanied by someone even for short distances, signs of abuse: physical signs and more subtle forms of control (...) [they] usually use violence to get their way*”; local law enforcement officer, 53 years old).

## Discussion

This research set out to explore the characteristics of victims and perpetrators as perceived by the Portuguese police and the relationship of these perceptions to the source of the officers’ knowledge about trafficking. According to the latest report published by the European Commission (2018), Portugal is the second country in the European Union with most trafficking victims for purposes of labor exploitation, mostly male, something very unique when compared to the international tendency. Moreover, to address the problem of trafficking, since 2007, the Portuguese government implemented public policies that draw particular attention to human trafficking combat, like the National Plans Against Trafficking in Human Beings (1st 2007–2010; 2nd 2011–2013; 3rd 2014–2017; 4th 2018–2021) and the National Trafficking Victims Support and Protection Network, where law enforcement agencies are integrated. This allows police officers to have a structured working plan and learning experiences when talking about human trafficking. Having all of this in mind, Portugal is a unique setting to explore these perceptions.

The officers’ descriptions about trafficking victims are consistent with the European image of the “iconic” victim (Rodríguez-López, 2018), who is most likely a young woman from a poor or developing country (in other words, a foreigner)

who is emotionally and psychologically fragile, easily influenced and unable to perceive the danger she faces, thus linking the type of exploitation to the sex of the victim (making associations between sexual exploitation and women and between labor exploitation and men). Additionally, trafficking has traditionally been seen as a synonym for illegal immigration, with law enforcement having difficulty distinguishing between human trafficking and illegal immigration and between national and international trafficking (Newton et al., 2008; Rodríguez-López, 2018). When talking about victims' vulnerabilities, some participants identified undocumented immigrants and minorities as groups at a high risk for being trafficked (Chan, 2018; Nsonwu, 2019).

The common confusion between human smuggling and human trafficking and the lack of understanding about the characteristics of trafficking victims and the fact that "anyone" can be a victim of human trafficking is congruent with prior research conducted with police officers (e.g., Cunha et al., 2019; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Farrell et al., 2015; Mapp et al., 2016; Matos et al., 2019). However, the European image of the "iconic" victim described by police officers is incongruent with the national reality and official statistics. For example, most victims identified within Portugal are men who suffer from labor exploitation (MAI OTSH, 2018, 2019). One possible explanation is that these identifications usually occur in groups of victims exploited in agriculture work. Therefore, while most of the identified victims are men being exploited for their labor, the identification context of these victims allows a high number of identifications at once and does not invalidate the fact that police officers may perceive the victims of sexual exploitation to only be females. In Portugal, it is very difficult to fully know whether trafficking for sexual purposes is being under identified due to a lack of understanding or if this type of exploitation actually has a low prevalence in the country when compared to the global tendency. In addition, the decriminalization of prostitution in Portugal has made it very difficult to identify and assess sexually commercialized situations that may actually be considered human trafficking. Another issue is the image of trafficking victims as foreigners; while victims in other countries may more commonly be foreigners (see for example Hynes et al., 2018), in Portugal, a significant percentage of identified victims are nationals being exploited within their own borders (MAI OTSH, 2018, 2019). Therefore, this misperception may cause complacency; police officers may be less vigilant when presented with human trafficking situations where the victim is not a migrant or from an ethnic minority. Additionally, it is likely that the image of foreign victims is weakening police responses, with law enforcement grounding their approach in tactics more applicable to migration, therefore treating trafficked individuals merely as undocumented migrants and ultimately undermining antitrafficking objectives (Marinova & James, 2012).

Undeniably, international trafficking cycle is highly gendered. In our study, the associations between sexual exploitation and women and between labor exploitation and men are also worrying. The narrative among police officers of sexual trafficking as exclusive to women and labor trafficking as exclusive to men speaks to an even stronger stereotyped perception about this phenomenon and does not represent the diversity of human trafficking. In prior research with Portuguese professionals working in this area (including police officers), most participants have expressed that they

believe that most sexual exploitation involves women and most labor exploitation involves men (Cunha et al., 2019). In Portugal, it holds true that most identified male victims are subjected to labor exploitation, and most identified female victims are subject to sexual exploitation (European Commission, 2018; MAI OTSH 2018, 2019). Nevertheless, this gendered approach may ultimately limit law enforcement interventions and contribute to a failure to detect victims.

The fact that police officers consider that victims usually pursue and accept proposals from traffickers in order to improve their living conditions may suggest distinctive attitudes towards trafficking victims with significant implications for criminal investigations and prosecutions (Farrell et al., 2014), such as victim blaming or the acceptance of some trafficking misconceptions (Lo & Chambers, 2016). Given the difficulty of gathering evidence about this type of crime, victim cooperation and testimony are essential to prosecution in a human trafficking case (Farrell & Kane, 2019). However, law enforcement officials simultaneously view victims as a barrier to prosecution because they believe that victims are to some degree responsible for their victimization or that prior criminal acts make the victims less credible or reliable witnesses (Farrell et al., 2012), and fewer witnesses will naturally lead to lower prosecution rates.

In turn, when asked to freely describe a human trafficker, police officers' descriptions are also consistent with the global image of traffickers (Austin, 2016; Cockbain, 2018), most likely a man who is psychologically unstable and skilled at gaining the victims' trust. Among police officers, the "iconic" trafficker is seen as someone educated and socially skilled who has access to some facilitating factors (e.g., money), a criminal history with crimes that, to some extent, facilitate human trafficking (e.g., document falsification), and an association with ongoing criminal networks. Traffickers have different roles in the trafficking process (UN.GIFT, 2008), which means that the profile described by most police officers may be associated with the leader of the network. As Denton (2016) explains, social networks play a significant role in the human trafficking process and create structural systems of individuals who connect traffickers to other traffickers and to their victims. Therefore, depending on the social network established, traffickers may be from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and may be socially engaged or isolated, and family members or friends may be the link between the victim and the trafficking situation. Despite the potential of network analysis to help identify underlying patterns, such analysis seems to be largely missing from current anti-trafficking initiatives (Dandurand, 2017), especially in Portugal. Similarly, police officers have the perception that traffickers are integrated into organized criminal networks. Therefore, officers may neglect individual and personal operations. The number of people associated with human trafficking is equal to their increasing diversity, and this diversity and the associated problem of stereotypical perceptions mean that there is a lower risk of detection, investigation and punishment for traffickers than for those involved in other criminal activities (Santos et al., 2008). Therefore, it is not surprising that existing groups linked to organized crime show interest in the phenomenon and that new groups regularly emerge (Santos et al., 2008). Additionally, the combination of low detention risk, perpetuated by the ineffectiveness of law enforcement, and a high reward potential serves to fuel the activity of human trafficking (Hodge, 2014).

Beyond the detection of trafficking, officers also hold an important role in the reporting/prosecution of this crime (Chesbrough, 2018). Identifying traffickers is as important as identifying victims since human trafficking cases are more likely to lead to criminal prosecution if the identity of the suspect is known when the case is reported (Bjelland, 2017). However, for Portuguese and international police officers and other justice professionals, the reporting procedure and evidence or legal elements necessary to prove that a trafficking crime has occurred are unclear (e.g., Farrell & Kane, 2019; Farrell et al., 2016, 2019a; Fernandes, 2012; Matos et al., 2018). Nevertheless, although most police officers in this study described “iconic” victims and traffickers, they seem to be more sensitive to questions referring to criminal dynamics and circumstances that may indicate a potential trafficking situation (e.g., the victim can be exploited within his/her country/region or can be transported to another country; several forms of exploitation, such as sexual and labor exploitation, exist; and traffickers use diverse means of control such as psychological and physical abuse). One study with Italian and British police officers also found a congruence between the violence and abuses described by authorities as forms of violence perpetrated by traffickers and those described in the literature (Zimmerman et al., 2003). The officers were also able to describe the restrictive economic, social and health conditions in which the victims live. These trafficking dynamics can be considered trafficking “red flags”, which are different from risk or “push” factors. While economic difficulties, for example, make people vulnerable to trafficking situations, “red flags” may indicate that a trafficking situation is ongoing or has occurred in the past (Schwarz et al., 2016). This police awareness should ideally trigger identification and police intervention.

Finally, although the dominant narrative points to stereotyped images of those involved in human trafficking, a few police officers noted that anyone can be a trafficking victim or trafficker. The presence (or absence) of any one indicator is not necessarily proof that someone is involved in this crime, and the perception that anyone can be a victim or trafficker in the right circumstances is adequate and should contribute to more effective interventions. In a study developed with police officers in the US, approximately one-third of officers (29%) correctly noted that “anyone” can be a victim of human trafficking, and this description was significantly related to the source of their information (official/unofficial, where official sources included training, law enforcement publications, while unofficial sources included magazines, movies, and other mass media; Mapp et al., 2016).

These results also supported previous research showing that police officers lack specialized training; almost half of the police officers reported having only informal/unofficial training (e.g., mass media) or no training on trafficking. Thus, it is not surprising that most police officers offered answers congruent with media stereotypes of the “iconic” victim and trafficker. Lacking specialized training, police officers may find that the knowledge and perceptions acquired through the media are their main source of information (Farrell & Fahy, 2009), which can weaken their responses, as they may have doubts or insecurities about the descriptions of those involved due to stereotypes. The same may be true for police officers who did not answer the free-response questions or wrote “I don’t know”. Moreover, police officers might hold onto dominating narratives even when training was received. In fact, while National

policies have emphasized professional training in this area (e.g., to promote training to all law enforcement and services on prevention, investigation, and methodologies for assisting human trafficking victims), training related to human trafficking should be evaluated to understand which programs are more effective than others.

This is problematic, as these police officers are included in the mandate of Portuguese law to identify trafficking victims, and they occupy a privileged place in the victim identification hierarchy, specifically in regard to process management and developing good working practices (Cunha et al., 2019). The lack of knowledge or an inaccurate idea of who victims and traffickers are may contribute to a lack of positive identifications and to misconceptions about the nature of the crime, as police officers may be unable to make appropriate decisions regarding human trafficking situations. However, human trafficking legal cases initiated by the police tend to result in more criminal prosecutions and are more likely to end with an indictment of the suspect than do trafficking cases filed by victims or other parties (Bjelland, 2017).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Our study suggests that police officers conceptualize trafficking victims and traffickers using globally common criteria rather than with specificities of the environment in which they operate. Combined with the findings of others (e.g., Cunha et al., 2019; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Farrell et al., 2015; Mapp et al., 2016; Matos et al., 2018, 2019) who have examined justice professionals' knowledge and understanding of human trafficking, the evidence from Portugal confirms the findings of international studies, suggesting that we currently have an adequate understanding of the criminal dynamics surrounding this crime but an inadequate understanding of trafficking victims and human traffickers.

Contrary to other international studies, this research analyzes the perceptions of local law enforcement about trafficking victims and traffickers in an integrative way. Moreover, in a unique setting such as Portugal, with statistical data pointing to labor exploitation as a major problem, our study evaluates these perceptions in a unique context, which has implications for future identification and prevention strategies, as well as for the investigation and prosecution of this growing crime. These results also support framing theory, since almost half of the police officers reported having only informal/unofficial training (e.g., mass media) or no training on trafficking. Therefore, the present results also reinforce the need to prioritize professional training as a powerful measure to fight human trafficking. As first-line professionals who are usually the first point of contact for victims (e.g., of human trafficking, domestic violence), law enforcement officials assume a pivotal role in the crime-fighting hierarchy. We believe that, as with human trafficking, misconceptions about other crimes may also lead to ineffective practices (see for example Sheridan et al., 2016; Russell, 2018). As recommended by Matos et al. (2019), it is important to promote the training of specialized police officers and other justice professionals in human trafficking rather than continue with the excessive mobility of police officers between criminal domains. These results also provide further evidence on the



impact of human trafficking framing on crime awareness and understanding, especially among law enforcement, and offer a foundation for future research. In addition, modern technology and globalization have created opportunities for criminal activity by giving traffickers tools and access to countless potential victims (e.g., the use of information and communication technology can lead to an increased risk of becoming a victim, especially among children; Jordan et al., 2013; Moynihan et al., 2018; Reid, 2016). Therefore, preventing and combating new and emerging crimes is a challenging task, and without the appropriate time, resources, and education, law enforcement relies on previously established schema to gain skills and knowledge (Farrell et al., 2015).

A possible limitation in this study is the nature of the questions (open answer), and the research method (online), which did not allow the exploration of other topics relevant to this theme. This subject requires further investigation since it is not clear if these views affect the way these professionals deal with human trafficking situations and their victims. Another limitation is asking about a profile; the way this question was formulated could induce the answer from the participants towards a brief representation. Additionally, it is also acknowledged that when using a convenience sample, the answers reveal the perceptions of professionals who may or may not have experience working with human trafficking cases. Furthermore, the self-report nature of the data leads us to be cautious with our interpretations. As we stated in Cunha et al. (2019), even though the participants were guaranteed anonymity, they may have provided responses that they thought were, in general, more socially acceptable. Finally, since we did not disseminate the study and the sociodemographic part of the instrument only asked about the participants' profession, we do not have access to information on the functions of law enforcement officers, so we could not evaluate the representativeness of this sample.

These misconceptions might be hard to assess from survey data, so qualitative interviews should be considered in future studies to gain more insight into police officers' perceptions, understandings, and experiences when dealing with human trafficking cases, as well as into the type and quality of the formal/official training they have received. Future research needs to include data related to the situational factors of crimes instead of only focusing on individual factors or vulnerabilities prior to the trafficking experience (Cho et al., 2018). By also focusing on the situational factors of crimes, law enforcement officials will have other facts to consider, which may facilitate the identification of victims. Additionally, victims' cooperation and credibility through all stages of the criminal justice procedure are important. Future research should therefore examine the ways in which law enforcement practices focus on evidence-based approaches and should explore the victims' role during criminal proceedings. The adoption of a victim-centered approach for fighting human trafficking is extremely important (Farrell et al., 2012; McKenzie et al., 2019), as it can increase the number of cases reported and investigated by police officers and lead to both greater victim cooperation and more trafficker convictions.

**Funding** This study was partially conducted at the Psychology Research Centre (UID/PSI/01662/2013), University of Minho, and supported by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology

and the Portuguese Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education through national funds and co-financed by FEDER through COMPETE2020 under the PT2020 Partnership Agreement (POCI-01-0145-FEDER-007653).

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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