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Explaining the Use of Traditional Law Enforcement Responses to Human Trafficking Concerns in Illicit Massage Businesses

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ABSTRACT

Traditional police tactics such as rapid response and reactive enforcement continue to dominate the police response against human trafficking despite knowledge about the challenges and potential harm of using these tactics. Through the case of illicit massage businesses (IMBs), this study examines why police continue to rely on strategies that have received little empirical support. In-depth interviews with police, prosecutors, and other practitioners indicate that citizen concerns about human trafficking trigger police responses such as reactive investigations, sting operations, and shutdowns of IMBs. While law enforcement officials recognize the limited effectiveness and potential harm of the current response, adapting how police respond to IMBs is challenged by perceptual and institutional barriers. With these findings, the study contributes to the research and theory on traditional policing and informs targeted and victim-centered anti-trafficking efforts.

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human trafficking; law enforcement actions; policing; deterrence

Introduction

As human trafficking emerged as a serious public concern in the early 2000s, the police have been increasingly called upon to combat this problem (Farrell et al., 2015; Farrell & Cronin, 2015). In the United States, the 2000 Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA) was the first federal law that criminalized human trafficking as the recruitment of people by means of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of sexual or labor exploitation.¹ Amidst broader concerns about organized crime and national security threats, the TVPA introduced human trafficking as a serious crime requiring criminal justice system responses, attributing a particularly central role to law enforcement in anti-trafficking efforts (Farrell & Fahy, 2009).

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¹Minors engaging in commercial sex acts are considered victims of sex trafficking regardless of indications of force, fraud, or coercion (TVPA, 2000, P.L. 106-386).

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However, concerns exist that police are ill-equipped to respond to human trafficking (Farrell et al., 2019; Wilson & Dalton, 2008). Legislation that criminalizes the problem is relatively new, and few agencies have the required routines, capacity, or structures to investigate human trafficking (Farrell et al., 2014; Jurek & King, 2020). With limited experience or expertise on human trafficking, vice units traditionally tasked to enforce anti-prostitution laws have been employed to guide police responses (Farrell & Cronin, 2015). Consequently, traditional vice tactics such as sting operations and shutdowns of venues that facilitate commercial sex are common anti-trafficking enforcement strategies.

These traditional crime control techniques face significant scrutiny both within and outside of the context of human trafficking. In particular, the police response to human trafficking has been criticized for not being victim-oriented (Farrell et al., 2019; Wilson & Dalton, 2008): Few victims of human trafficking are identified, in part because trafficked persons often do not self-identify as victims, fear retribution from their exploiter, and mistrust authorities (Farrell et al., 2019). Additionally, few trafficking cases are prosecuted because, absent adequate training, police often fail to secure the evidence of force, fraud or coercion necessary to prosecute these cases (Farrell et al., 2014). These limitations have led to questions about the role of law enforcement in addressing human trafficking, especially because the root causes of human trafficking, such as inequality and poverty, remain largely unaddressed (Farrell & Fahy, 2009).

Traditional police responses to human trafficking also do not seem to be informed by theoretical and program evaluation evidence on effective policing efforts. Policing tactics are effective when the risk of punishment outweighs the benefits of engaging in crime (Gibbs, 1975; Zimring & Hawkins, 1973). This typically requires policing strategies that alter both risk perceptions and crime opportunities such that benefits from crime are no longer proportionate to the effort and risks (Braga & Weisburd, 2010; Nagin et al., 2015). Empirical research has shown significant crime reductions as a result of proactive policing strategies that are problem-oriented as they address the underlying conditions of crime and engage a wide variety of tools and partners to respond to crime (Weisburd & Eck, 2004). However, the traditional policing tactics that we commonly see applied in human trafficking cases, such as rapid response and reactive enforcement, have limited effects on reducing crime rates (Nagin, 2013; Nagin et al., 2015).

This study advances prior work on the limitations of traditional enforcement tactics through an in-depth examination of policing tactics used to combat human trafficking, focused here on the case of illicit massage businesses (IMBs) that owe their name to hosting illicit events, primarily commercial sex, under the guise of legitimate massage. A recent report suggests that more than 9,000 IMBs are open across the U.S. (Polaris, 2018), although the precise number is unknown due to the difficulty to separate legitimately-operating massage parlors from those that host illegal activity (de Vries, 2020; de Vries & Radford, 2021). Moreover, IMBs are considered one of the top venues for sex trafficking involving adults and comprised the largest group of citizen calls to the National Human Trafficking Hotline in 2019 (2020).

Concerns about human trafficking in IMBs have activated responses by police that rely primarily on reactive enforcement such as shutdowns and arrests of providers on

the premises (see e.g. Hill & Bruce, 2017; Polaris, 2018). While these efforts demonstrate a willingness to respond to crime and victimization problems in IMBs, the effectiveness of police tactics against human trafficking in IMBs is questionable. There is anecdotal evidence that IMBs reopen after a shutdown at or near a location where an action took place (e.g. Axon et al., 2019). Additionally, few human trafficking prosecutions have resulted from police shutdowns of IMBs, with the consequence that there is little accountability for traffickers, and few victims in IMBs are recognized for services and support (Polaris, 2018).

Utilizing data from qualitative interviews with 44 police officers, prosecutors and other practitioners directly involved in police actions targeting human trafficking in IMBs, we seek to understand how police arrive at the strategies to address human trafficking in order to guide more successful anti-trafficking efforts. Before continuing with our empirical work, we begin with a background section on police responses to commercial sex and sex trafficking, followed by theoretical perspectives on police routines and effective deterrence.

Police Responses to Commercial Sex and Sex Trafficking: Perceptions and Practices Informed by Vice Routines

Police have been involved in combatting commercial sex in the U.S. since the early twentieth century when Congress, followed by individual states, passed legislation that criminalized prostitution (Farrell & Cronin, 2015). Vice units were established within police agencies to enforce anti-prostitution laws through undercover investigations, sting operations, and arrests of commercial sex workers. As citizen concerns about prostitution as a form of social disorder grew in the 1960s and 1970s, policing efforts were increasingly focused on reducing the visibility of commercial sex in public areas, including businesses potentially hosting commercial sex (Hubbard, 2013). However, in line with the limited effectiveness of traditional law enforcement arrests generally, prostitution arrests have done little to prevent people from engaging in commercial sex (Hester & Westmarland, 2004; Hubbard, 2013).

With the implementation of the TVPA and subsequent state anti-trafficking legislation, policing efforts were redirected from making arrests for prostitution offenses to identifying and protecting sex trafficking victims within the commercial sex industry (Farrell & Cronin, 2015). In line with research confirming that when faced with emerging and newly-defined problems, people rely on pre-existing knowledge, routines, and experiences (Fiske & Linville, 1980), the police response to human trafficking has been primarily delegated to existing vice units. These units employ traditional vice and crime control strategies such as sting operations, undercover work, or reactive investigations to uncover human trafficking (Farrell et al., 2015; Farrell & Cronin, 2015; Irwin, 2017). Traditional vice tactics used against IMBs commonly result in (at least temporary) shutdowns of illicit venues or the arrests of operators engaged in illicit activity.

However, there are three main challenges to using traditional vice tactics against human trafficking in IMBs. First, strategies such as sting operations and crackdowns have little disruptive impact when they treat human trafficking as an isolated offense and neglect the interconnectivity between human trafficking operations in IMBs. This

interconnectivity exists through shared ownership of storefronts, the rotation of commercial sex providers across different venues, and the involvement of criminal networks (de Vries, 2020; Polaris, 2018). Second, few police actions have resulted in prosecutions for human trafficking, signaling little accountability for traffickers (Axon et al., 2019; see also Farrell et al., 2014, 2019). Third, vice enforcement focuses on prostitution as an offense (Farrell & Cronin, 2015), whereas identifying human trafficking requires a victim-oriented approach (Farrell et al., 2019). Not only is there little evidence that vice tactics decrease victimization risk (see also Farrell et al., 2014, 2019), these tactics can be harmful when victims face the risk of arrest and criminal prosecution as police identify their involvement in commercial sex (e.g. Ebbert, 2019; Sharp, 2017).

Scholars have expressed particular concern about these harms being more profound for victims of human trafficking within marginalized communities, such as people of color, people with foreign nationalities, and LGBTQ+ people (Boukli & Renz, 2019; Bryant-Davis & Tummala-Narra, 2017; Fehrenbacher et al., 2020). Victims of human trafficking within these communities are more frequently perceived as “less exploitable” – a label that assumes a degree of willingness or need to engage in commercial sex, which is met with a higher degree of criminalization (Bryant-Davis & Tummala-Narra, 2017; Fehrenbacher et al., 2020; Musto, 2016). This denial of victimhood is inherent to current anti-trafficking efforts that create “hierarchies of victimhood” (Dunn, 2010, p. 6) based on sharp dichotomies of innocence versus blameworthy, and deserving versus undeserving of protection (Boukli & Renz, 2019; Musto, 2009). Because the dominant policy narrative focuses on sex trafficking of domestic minors as deserving most protection (Srikantiah, 2007) and human trafficking in IMBs more frequently involves sex and labor exploitation of adult women, many of whom are foreign nationals (Polaris, 2018), these victims tend to receive less sympathy or protection (de Vries et al., 2019).

Without specialized training on human trafficking, police officers may not be able to separate human trafficking victimizations in IMBs from illicit behaviors such as commercial sex, human smuggling, document fraud or other issues that are often part of coercive and fraudulent tactics in human trafficking operations (Farrell et al., 2019; Irwin, 2017). This inability to isolate human trafficking victimizations from crime involvement underscores the concerns about the ineffectiveness and harm of traditional vice tactics to combat human trafficking (Farrell et al., 2019; Wilson & Dalton, 2008).

Police as Apprehension or Sentinel Agents

Traditional vice tactics against human trafficking may also be ineffective because they are not informed by the core principles of effective crime control and prevention strategies. Two broad theoretical perspectives are generally employed to explain when policing tactics may be effective: deterrence and crime opportunity reduction. Deterrence theory hypothesizes that would-be offenders refrain from crime when the perceived risk of apprehension and punishment outweighs the benefits of illegal behaviors (Gibbs, 1975; Zimring & Hawkins, 1973). Two key assumptions are that

would-be offenders are rational decision-makers who weigh benefits against risks of crime and that increasing the certainty, severity, and swiftness of punishment can impact their crime decisions (Clarke & Cornish, 1985; Cornish & Clarke, 1986). The literature distinguishes between general and specific deterrence (Cook, 1980). General deterrence strategies aim to prevent a general population from committing a crime by influencing their perceptions of the likelihood of punishment, for example through increased penalties or police presence. Specific deterrence focuses on chronic offenders and seeks to increase the perceived risk of sanctions to prevent future offending, a strategy that stems from persistent crime problems that were not prevented through general deterrence (Nagin, 2013).

Current police tactics against IMBs mostly mirror general deterrence strategies. For example, sting operations align with the purpose of police crackdowns that seek to enhance general deterrence through “sudden increases in officer presence, sanctions, and threats of apprehension either for specific offenses or for all offenses in specific places” (Sherman, 1990, p. 1). The effectiveness of such crackdowns depends on the extent to which they are intermittent, rotate targets, have publicity, and are coupled with actual arrests and prosecution (Sherman, 1990). Crackdowns and shutdowns of IMBs are less strategic and do not seem to prevent a reopening of IMBs in the same or adjacent location (e.g. Hill & Bruce, 2017).

In addition to influencing perceptions of crime risks, policing strategies may seek to alter the opportunity structures that influence a would-be offender’s decision-making process (Clarke & Cornish, 1985; Nagin et al., 2015). This is central to crime opportunity theories that posit that places have choice-structuring properties, some of which attract or generate crime (Natarajan, 2017). While an in-depth discussion of crime opportunity theories is beyond the scope of this study, the overarching assumption of these theories is that an offender’s assessment of crime opportunities is influenced by routine behaviors and an awareness of environmental cues that signal high rewards but little risk and efforts (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1993; Cohen & Felson, 1979; Felson, 1987). When learning about potential crime opportunities in a certain location and weighing those against a potential police threat, would-be offenders can adapt their decisions to engage in crime (Nagin et al., 2015).

Drawing on both deterrence and crime opportunity theories, police can reduce crime in two important ways: as apprehension and sentinel agents (Nagin, 2013; Nagin et al., 2015). Traditionally, police are trained as apprehension agents in that they respond to criminal events that have already occurred and seek to achieve deterrence through apprehension tactics (Goldstein, 1990; Reiss, 1971). Opportunity perspectives lay the ground for situational crime prevention measures, which promote the role of police as sentinel agents. In that role, police are the “capable guardians” that Cohen and Felson (1979) hypothesize to be one of the central actors whose (symbolic) presence or actions can reduce criminal opportunities (Eck & Weisburd, 1995; Felson, 1995). Traditional enforcement tactics typically do not employ police as sentinel agents. Instead, these strategies are often based on a flawed assumption that illicit opportunities are available to everyone and everywhere, and that merely influencing the perceived risk of apprehension would reduce crime (Repetto, 1976). However, most scientific research indicates that using traditional apprehension tactics alone,

including tactics similar to those observed against IMBs is ineffective in reducing crime (Nagin, 2013; Weisburd & Majmundar, 2018).

Empirical evidence on effective crime control and prevention strategies holds the most promise for proactive policing strategies that are geographically focused or person-oriented, and use a wide variety of tools and partners to respond to crime (Weisburd & Eck, 2004; Weisburd & Majmundar, 2018). These strategies employ police as sentinel agents who proactively respond to the underlying conditions of crime. For example, place-based approaches such as problem-oriented or hot spots policing that direct policing resources to a non-random concentration of crime have resulted in significant crime reductions (Braga et al., 2001; Braga et al., 2019). Crime reductions can also result from person-focused approaches such as focused deterrence strategies that seek to change the perceptions of sanction risks among potential high-risk offenders (Weisburd & Majmundar, 2018).

Several studies suggest that regulatory approaches to place management can be more effective than deterrence-based hot spot enforcement that may contribute to perceptions of unjust policing of certain areas and communities (Eck, 2015; Mazerolle & Ransley, 2006). Along these lines, outsourcing the role of sentinel agents to local guardians and place managers such as property owners may help reduce the opportunity for crime by strengthening the surveillance of places, informal social control, and crime reporting mechanisms (Eck, 2015; Eck & Guerette, 2012; Madensen, 2007). Other studies suggest the need for partnering with or reallocating crime control resources to agencies such as community organizations who may be better positioned to understand and address the underlying conditions of crime (e.g. Weisburd et al., 2015).

Despite the effectiveness of place-based and person-focused strategies, traditional law enforcement tactics continue to dominate the police response against IMBs, commercial sex, and sex trafficking (Farrell et al., 2019; Farrell & Cronin, 2015; Hubbard, 2013; Irwin, 2017; Jurek & King, 2020). These traditional tactics may harm victims, signal little risk for traffickers because they do not lead to human trafficking prosecutions, and leave unchanged opportunities for human trafficking operations in IMBs as the underlying conditions contributing to the problem are not addressed. It remains unclear why police and other criminal justice actors continue to rely on these traditional policing tactics to respond to human trafficking in IMBs.

Current Study

The current study seeks to better understand the police response to human trafficking concerns in IMBs through the following three research questions: (1) What motivates police to respond to human trafficking in IMBs?; (2) How do police arrive at the strategies to address human trafficking in IMBs and what strategies are used?; and (3) What are the perceived goals, effectiveness, and limitations of the current police response to human trafficking in IMBs? By answering these questions, this study seeks to advance prior research in three important ways. First, while previous literature has already begun to explore and challenge the use of traditional policing tactics against human trafficking (Farrell et al., 2015; Farrell & Cronin, 2015), this study examines why decades of existing research on the ineffectiveness of traditional vice tactics against

human trafficking (Farrell et al., 2019; Wilson & Dalton, 2008) has not changed how police respond to concerns about human trafficking in IMBs (see e.g. Hill & Bruce, 2017). Second, we seek to understand the police response to human trafficking in a situation where the crime primarily involves adults and foreign nationals who have received less attention in anti-trafficking efforts. Third, in contrast to prior work on police responses to sex trafficking, we focus on victimization in stationary locations (Polaris, 2018). This focus allows us to better understand the preferential use of traditional tactics as opposed to place-based situational crime prevention approaches that could target the areas that attract IMBs (see Chin et al., 2019; Crotty & Bouché, 2018; de Vries, 2020). As explained below, we examine the police response against IMBs through in-depth interviews with key practitioners.

Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative techniques are well-suited to gain a deeper understanding of why and how criminal justice agencies are responding to IMBs. Utilizing a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), we conducted and analyzed semi-structured interviews with 44 law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and others who have been directly involved in addressing human trafficking and related facets such as commercial sex and incidents of physical and sexual violence in IMBs. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained at Northeastern University (IRB 17-11-26).

Study Area

Data were collected in Massachusetts, Washington State, and Texas, as part of a larger project funded by the National Institute of Justice (Grant No. 2018-R2-CX-0005). We purposefully selected states in three corners of the U.S. to examine the police response in geographically and politically distinct areas. All three states had a considerable number of IMBs compared to other states, and law enforcement in each of these states had experience with investigating human trafficking concerns in IMBs. While sharing the concern about human trafficking in IMBs, the response to IMBs differs by state due to different legislations, training, or prioritizations. In particular, Massachusetts state law omits the components of force, fraud, or coercion that define the human trafficking means in federal legislation (Coreno, 2021), which broadens the scope for human trafficking charges in comparison to Washington State and Texas. Given the difficulty to prove force, fraud, and coercion, other states more commonly charge perpetrators under different statutes or search for alternative approaches such as demand-reduction programs. These between-state differences benefit this study as they may account for variety in perspectives on criminal justice strategies to human trafficking concerns in IMBs.

Sampling Design

To examine perspectives on law enforcement interventions against IMBs from within the system that implements these interventions, study participants were approached

and selected for an interview through a combination of non-probabilistic purposeful and snowball sampling strategies. Through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2014), we utilized two criteria in our selection of interview participants. Practitioners were approached (1) when they had direct experience in responding to human trafficking concerns in IMBs, and (2) when their addition to the study would ensure a greater variety regarding state, localities (municipality, county, state, or federal), agency types (law enforcement, prosecution, or service agencies), and experiences (e.g. title or rank). Variation in participants helps reduce bias toward a specific set of backgrounds (Creswell, 2013), which may influence motivations for and types of responses to human trafficking concerns (see Farrell et al., 2015, 2019; Jurek & King, 2020).

For the first set of interviews in Massachusetts, participants were recruited through convenience sampling using both of the authors' pre-existing connections and established rapport with agencies that had recently begun to prioritize responses to human trafficking in IMBs. Study participants in the other two states were selected through direct outreach to police agencies, licensing boards, and prosecuting offices. In all three states, subsequent snowball sampling strategies were used through the referrals of key informants to other practitioners with relevant knowledge and experience in addressing human trafficking concerns in IMBs. In some localities, these sampling strategies allowed for the inclusion of all stakeholders directly involved in criminal justice strategies against IMBs. In other localities, the selection of new participants continued until the last two interview participants in any one interviewee types (e.g. law enforcement or prosecutor) did not provide us with any new names of interview participants who would have added variety regarding their experience, locality, or agency. In short, we sought to achieve respondent saturation by obtaining as much variety as possible within a relatively small network of people who were directly involved with law enforcement tactics against IMBs.

A total of 44 practitioners were interviewed by the first author of this manuscript, which included 24 police officers, 12 prosecuting officials, and 8 representatives of victim service or state agencies that partnered with police.² The [supplementary material](#) provides further detail on the background characteristics of the interview participants.

Interview Process

The interviews were semi-structured and guided by a list of topics and open-ended questions within the following six domains of inquiry: (1) Background information; (2) Perspectives on the prevalence and nature of human trafficking in IMBs; (3) Strategies to identify human trafficking in IMBs; (4) Response mechanisms; (5) Effectiveness of these response mechanisms; and (6) Strategies to improve anti-trafficking efforts in IMBs (current, anticipated or recommended). Interviews were conducted between December 2017 and September 2018, lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and were mostly conducted in person. Only four interviews were conducted by phone. All

²Twelve participants were interviewed as part of group interviews (five in total) to respect organizational capacity constraints and if this was the only way of interviewing participants at all. The group interviews involved two to three participants per interview and always included participants within the same agency and with similar levels of expertise. We compared the key themes by type of interview (group or individual) and found no major differences.

interviewees were ensured confidentiality and signed written informed consent, either in-person or through email, using a digital signature, before the start of an interview. Nearly all interviews were audio-recorded. Detailed notes were taken in the five interviews where recording was not possible. After transcription, interviews were uploaded to QSR-NVIVO 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd., Victoria, Australia) for systematic qualitative coding and analysis.

Analytical Strategy

Consistent with a grounded theory approach of qualitative data analysis (Charmaz, 2014), we analyzed qualitative interview data to search for emergent themes during the early phases of analysis and inductively constructed categories that helped identify and explain law enforcement strategies against human trafficking in IMBs. Interviews were analyzed through sequential open, axial, and selective coding strategies (Creswell, 2013). Open coding was used as a first inductive coding strategy to identify emergent themes related to law enforcement strategies against human trafficking in IMBs. This allowed us to identify motivations for police responses to human trafficking (e.g. citizen concerns), specific types of crime control and crime prevention strategies employed (e.g. shutdowns, stings, undercover strategies, problem-oriented or intelligence-based strategies), and goals, effectiveness, and limitations of these responses (e.g. related to nuisance control, disrupting illicit markets, or difficulty to effectively reduce the volatility of the market). Axial coding strategies were then used to categorize inductively generated codes around theoretically relevant core phenomena, informed by the extant literature on crime control and prevention strategies (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In doing so, we applied a more deductive approach to link our emergent codes to key theoretical perspectives related to (1) citizen concerns and reactive policing; (2) organizational structure that influences the type of apprehension strategies and situational crime prevention tactics that are used; and (3) order maintenance and deterrence as two key policing goals. Through selective coding, we developed preliminary analytic notes drawing connections between codes and organizing the data around emergent codes that were categorized by theoretically relevant themes in the previous step. Figure 1 in the [supplementary material](#) presents the connectivity between the thematic codes.

To examine the validity of the key themes and to evaluate the level of homogeneity in respondents' data, we analyzed the frequency by which a theme appeared within and across interviews to ensure thematically relevant codes were appropriately captured across the qualitative interviews. We then proactively identified and analyzed negative cases, which are unique themes that did not fit the common narrative across interviews (Creswell, 2013). When findings did not appear to be homogeneous across respondents, we sought to identify potential differences against the background of key attributes such as state, agency, and locality.

Findings

Below, we examine the motivations and perceived effectiveness of police response to human trafficking in IMBs. To preserve the confidentiality of interviewees, data from the three study states have been de-identified.

Motivations for the Response to Human Trafficking

Interviewees confirmed that the police response to community concerns about human trafficking and exploitation within IMBs is largely driven by calls from the public about disorders or concerns associated with IMBs. In nearly all interviews (95%), calls from the public or complaints were discussed. One local law enforcement officer explains that although IMBs are not new, complaints about IMBs are increasingly common.

“I get complaints every week or so about the massage parlors here in [city]: ‘We need them gone’ ... They’ve been here for over a decade, but now people are aware of these. For whatever reason they just don’t like seeing it here...” (Local Law Enforcement, State 3).

Another local police officer suggests that growing media attention to the problem of human trafficking is driving increased calls to the police about IMBs, because of “concerned citizens who see this massage parlor, and see people coming and going from there, and know just enough about human trafficking to know that they go together and they make that connection and call” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). Police initiate action as a response to incoming concerns from citizens, as opposed to initiating proactive measures to identify victimization or disrupt illicit networks. As one detective notes, “...ongoing [IMB] investigations always seem to come from a complaint” (Local Law Enforcement, State 3). Reactive responses to complaints from the public are not unique to the response to IMBs. Policing is historically driven by reactions to public complaints and calls for service (Goldstein, 1990; Lum & Koper, 2017; Reiss, 1971).

However, increased pressure on the police to respond to calls about IMBs has made it difficult to develop cases in such a way that supports human trafficking prosecutions or disrupts illicit networks. As one local police officer explains, “...citizens [are] calling in about everything they think is trafficking and now it creates a bigger problem because you have to respond to all these tips and it ties us up and we can’t take care of the real stuff [investigations]” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). Another local officer echoes the challenge of keeping up with calls:

“We get a tip, we look into it, and there’s nothing we can do. Or we do something we can do, but it’s not until two months later because we’ve got these other things to do and then we heard about it again. So, it’s kind of like putting your finger in a bowl of spaghetti: What noodle you hit depends on where you hit it, and then you move it and you hit something else” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1).

Service providers who work closely with law enforcement confirmed the challenge local police face in responding to public complaints. “[C]ops are totally overwhelmed with this public pressure to do something about these businesses” (Other, State 3). Altogether, the interviews predominately indicate that community pressure drives reactive police responses to IMBs instead of proactive and strategic efforts against illicit networks and human trafficking.

Occasionally, police also come across human trafficking concerns in IMBs while screening IMB review websites. Three-fourths of the interviews included explicit discussion of screening IMB review websites for information about illicit activity. As one prosecutor noted, “Sometimes it’s local police proactively looking at websites [with

commercial sex ads or online reviews]... to see what locations are being reported in their community” (State Prosecution, State 2). However, reviews were primarily consulted reactively after receiving a tip from the public or to gather more information before an undercover enforcement operation. Interviewees also agreed that while reviews can tip them off about illicit activity in an IMB, they cannot initiate a shut-down based on a review alone. Despite the emergence of reviewboards which allow police to identify illicit activity occurring in IMBs, enforcement is driven mainly by complaints.

Police Response to Human Trafficking in IMBs

Organizational Structure and Priority

Once police learn about commercial sex and potential human trafficking in IMBs, the way they initiate action depends on internal organizational priorities that influence the time and tools police can employ. Local agencies have established structured ways to respond to human trafficking concerns in IMBs, for example through establishing specialized units or dedicating officers. Nearly half of the interviewees (43%) worked within a specialized human trafficking division or was trained and devoted to human trafficking investigations within their agency. Specialized units bring greater awareness about the crime of human trafficking and provide resources to train officers about how to respond to human trafficking victimization. As one officer explains: “for a lot of these [cases] the approach is counter to what most law enforcement officers know ... ‘they’re going to think they’re [victims] not credible or they’re lying’ because that’s what officers have been trained to do and most suspects lie to officers” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). This officer went on to explain that through specialized training on trauma, the officers in his unit have been able to conduct successful interviews with sex trafficking victims that produced information to build investigations.

While officers across the three study sites were trained to respond to human trafficking utilizing victim-centered approaches, specialized responses to human trafficking were not guaranteed because identifying and responding to human trafficking cases involve “a huge amount of effort and few agencies are willing to pony up the time” (Federal Law Enforcement, State 3). Interviewees confirmed the importance of top-down prioritization. In one agency, human trafficking did not become a priority until the department reorganized and brought in a new director. Broadly, prioritization of human trafficking through specialized units and training fluctuates as management and priorities change. Officers described the frustration of starting human trafficking investigations only to be diverted to other work. When internal priorities shift, officers in specialized units can be recruited for other units that are more permanently ingrained in police agencies such as patrol. As one investigator in a specialized unit explained: “Because patrol is a priority, I’ve had detectives that were taken away from investigating trafficking because they had to go and work in patrol” (Federal Law Enforcement State 3).

Across the three states, vice units have a primary role in the identification of human trafficking and response to IMBs, even when agencies had specialized human trafficking units. As one law enforcement officer puts it: “[Tips] go straight to the vice unit”

(Local Law Enforcement, State 3). This central role of vice units aligns with prior research, which has confirmed that law enforcement approaches human trafficking by framing the problem as prostitution, a criminalized problem to which police are familiar (Coreno, 2021; Farrell et al., 2015).

However, vice units are not well suited to develop long-term, complex investigations: “[T]hey [vice officers] typically work on like one girl with one pimp, or maybe two girls with one pimp. Kinda the one-hitter, is what I call it. It’s not necessarily an organization” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). As another detective explains: “... a vice unit is going to come across the girls probably more than anyone else, but you have to understand that vice is an operational unit, not an investigative unit” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). Furthermore, as a result of the focus on commercial sex within vice units, interviewees recognized that labor trafficking elements in IMBs are often not understood or recognized: “... not in massage parlors. [In] very few cases we get tips for labor trafficking. That’s a real forgotten thing. Human trafficking people focus on the sex trafficking” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). Some vice tactics may have changed in response to concerns about human trafficking as law enforcement would previously “arrest women all day long” but are now “trying to refocus on johns and the pimps/trafficker” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). Nonetheless, police often approach human trafficking in IMBs with the historical focus on commercial sex and utilizing traditional vice enforcement tactics.

Police Strategies: Apprehension and Situational Crime Prevention Tactics

The types of police responses to IMBs can be understood against the background of how police seek to achieve order maintenance and deterrence by dominantly engaging in apprehension strategies and less frequently in situational crime control. First, as police respond to growing citizen complaints about IMBs, they commonly rely on traditional vice tactics such as large-scale arrests, undercover operations and “johns stings” to validate public complaints. Respondents described using these tactics to combat human trafficking or commercial sex in IMBs in over 90 percent of the interviews. For example, police set up undercover operations to confirm commercial sex and establish any other violations. Similarly, “johns stings” often involve police officers that are stationed outside IMBs who stop and interrogate a potential buyer of commercial sex: “If he admits to it, we’ll give him a promise not to prosecute so long as he tells the truth about what happened in there ... That’s one of the ways we can show that there was commercial sex going on” (State Prosecution, State 2). Even when police identify IMBs on reviewboards that advertise commercial sex, they continue to rely on vice tactics to “corroborate with what [a website - blinded] is already telling us is going on in there ...” (Federal Law Enforcement, State 2). Some policing tactics against IMBs are similar to Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) operations that are intended to incite fear and serve a deterrent purpose: “They always go in SWAT gear, in uniform ...” (NGO Representative, State 3). The enforcement itself is intended to create fear and deter future illicit activity.

Law enforcement universally expresses that the ultimate goal of stings and undercover operations is shutting down the IMBs and providing deterrence to prevent future establishments from opening: “We just want to shut it down” (Federal Law

Enforcement, State 2). “Our goal is to shut them down. Because the more they’re open, the more opportunity there is to traffic women in and out of there” (Local Prosecution, State 1). The use of shutdowns as a “victim protection tactic” was recurrently mentioned by both law enforcement and prosecution officers who generally argued that through shutdowns IMBs “can’t operate anymore, and they can’t bring in any more girls” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). Several of the service agencies also mentioned shutdowns as a necessary “effort that we can make to make it harder for people to traffic people” (Other, State 3). Police most commonly arrest operators and managers that are onsite during the sting operation. While police acknowledge that arrests can cause harm to potential victims of sex or labor trafficking, they also believed that “the next time ... something happens, they’re more apt to talk to police” (Local Law Enforcement, State 3). Other police officers similarly discussed apprehension as a victim protection strategy:

“Let’s say 90% of the people in an illicit massage parlor are there voluntarily, and 10% aren’t. If law enforcement could shut that down, they’re making it harder for them to traffic the 10%. Is it possibly making life more complicated for the 90% who wanted to use commercial sex as survival mechanisms... sure. But the whole idea is that we’re trying to protect the 10% of people being trafficked” (Local Law Enforcement, State 2).

In addition to making arrests, interviewees in other states highlighted several other tactics to drive IMBs out of business such as retroactive investigations (state 2) or large-scale arrests of buyers and demand-reduction strategies (state 3). One state (state 1), where the response to human trafficking in IMBs was less frequently coming from specialized units, often applied regulatory approaches to shut down IMBs and make sure that “those folks can’t operate anymore and they can’t bring in any more girls” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). One detective describes this process: “If we are able to prove criminal activity like prostitution occurring, ... then we can file a nuisance abatement, a civil injunction, and have them shut down” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). Traditional apprehension tactics and civic ordinances were frequently used in conjunction: Nuisance abatements can follow from prostitution arrests, license violations, or any other violation that can be cited as a reason to shut down an IMB.

While there was widespread acknowledgment among interviewees that shutdowns were the primary approach to addressing human trafficking in IMBs, around 90% of the interviews included concerns about the ineffectiveness of this approach, often highlighting that “It usually ends with shutting down that establishment. But we know that there’s others connected, and we know that it’s gonna pop up somewhere else. The victims are arrested for prostitution, and they get probation, or the case is dismissed, and they’re back in the business” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). Recognizing the limitations of apprehension tactics, a few localities experimented with alternative approaches and had begun integrating tactics aimed at preventing crime and strategically disrupting illegal operations. For example, one police agency engaged in investigative tactics to identify the person “who’s got the most to lose” (Federal Law Enforcement, State 1). As another officer explains, financial investigations may unravel underlying illicit networks that connect multiple IMBs:

"I did financials on a few of them, and looking at the employees as well as the owners, we don't see a connection, but through the financial records they were depositing money into the same *** account [a financial account]. This *** account had 151 signature cards for it. And in the 2-year period, 17 million dollars were funneled through this *** account" (Local Law Enforcement, State 3, identifying information was removed to preserve confidentiality).

These long-term investigations were uncommon, especially among local agencies that often "don't have financial investigators" (Local Prosecution, State 2) and "rely on other people to just be doing those investigations and figuring out the connections and prosecuting people" (Local prosecution, State 1). While a few state agencies highlighted the work of their analyst, interviewees recognized that "it's a lot of work for one individual and one location, to map out literally hundreds and hundreds [IMBs] of what's going on" (State Law Enforcement, State 3).

In addition to occasional problem-oriented investigations, some interviewees had begun to experiment with situational crime prevention tactics. For example, a few agencies sought to increase local guardianship by engaging place managers such as property owners and alert them of their responsibility to prevent that their venues are used for illicit purposes:

"So we're giving them a warning that they need to do something. So, we can go back in there again and sue the owner. It's called suing the dirt, whoever owns the land, and they can put an injunction on them for not doing anything. So now if they try to lease or sell the property, there's an injunction that they have to pay and all that" (Local Law Enforcement, State 1).

Although property owners might not always have known about commercial sex and sex trafficking in their buildings, police and prosecutors in other states suspected that many turn a blind eye to the fact that their buildings are used for illicit purposes: "I mean, obviously I can't prove that they're lying, but I know they are. The reality is, at the end of the day, as long as they're collecting their monthly rent, some people just don't care" (State Prosecution, State 2).

Limitations of the Current Police Response

Despite experimenting with new approaches, traditional apprehension tactics dominate police responses to human trafficking, with police aiming to achieve order maintenance or deter future illicit activity in IMBs. In this section, we address the perceived challenges of achieving both goals and highlight related concerns around prioritization and victim cooperation.

Limitations of Achieving Order Maintenance

Traditional vice busts are order-maintenance strategies that seek to drive IMBs out of business. However, interviewees broadly acknowledged the limitations of large-scale arrests and sting operations. As one interviewee argues, arrests have little impact on business operations when the business stays open: "they [IMBs owners or managers] are still finding other people to work there" (Local Prosecution, State 1). Another law enforcement agent suggests that "... we're not going to arrest our way out of this

problem at all. But ... it would be so easy to, so simple to just legislate these places out of business" (Local Law Enforcement, State 3).

Although the use of licensing or zoning regulations can help agencies shut down IMBs without arresting providers who may be victims of human trafficking, such strategies seem to do little to prevent new IMBs from opening up. Respondents specifically mentioned "whack-a-mole effects", which means that shortly after conducting arrests and shutting down an IMB, "the next one pops up" (Local Law Enforcement, State 1), in approximately 45 percent of the interviews. As one officer explains, IMBs are perceived to be ubiquitous and emerging in what feels like random places: "I could throw a rock from here and hit three of them from this office. They are popping up all over" (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). Interviewees argued that connections between IMBs, through shared ownership and being part of a larger illicit market, explains why shutdowns are ineffective in preventing the opening of new IMBs: "They keep bouncing around. They'll have one open here and one open two cities away so, it's a part of the connections between them all" (State Law Enforcement, State 3). Even when order maintenance strategies such as shutdowns signal responsiveness to IMB problems, they do little to stop the criminal network from operating or opening new businesses. Put differently, "if you don't cut the head off the snake, it's going to keep popping back up" (Local Law Enforcement, State 1).

Limitations of Achieving Deterrence

By extension, interviewees generally recognized that using traditional tactics against human trafficking in IMBs did not achieve deterrence either. Few shutdowns resulted in investigations that expose human trafficking or the involvement of criminal networks. For many officers, an IMB is off law enforcement's radar once it is shut down, but to hold offenders accountable, it is "after you shut down the parlors when the real work starts and when you make all the connections ..." (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). Yet, often it does not come to a larger network disruption because police struggle to keep up with the influx of public calls about IMBs: "We're just doing the best we can with what we've got ... Do I have an overall five-year master plan to solve this problem? No, I don't. I don't have a one-year master plan for me to survive doing this" (Local law enforcement, State 1). Even when it comes to an investigation or prosecution, obtaining victim statements from potentially trafficked persons in IMBs is difficult as police and prosecutors are "meeting them under very stressful circumstances: they're terrified of law enforcement, they do not see us as friends, they do not want to talk to us" (State Prosecution, State 2). Concerns around victim engagement and victim support were especially shared among female participants, victim service agencies and prosecutors in a state that had several ongoing human trafficking charges against IMB managers. These participants were particularly concerned about victims being arrested during shutdowns, further decreasing the likelihood that they will provide the police with information or testify at trial. In addition, they expressed concern about the lack of services offered to IMB staff, whose socio-economic and immigration status may increase risk to exploitation, abuse, and financial hardships after shutdowns. The lack of services along with the stress and trauma imposed on potential victims during shutdowns and sting operations may explain why law enforcement

“wouldn’t get corroborating statements” (Representative local NGO, State 3), which is at odds with the suggested use of apprehension tactics as a victim protection strategy.

Local law enforcement officers and officers with specialized human trafficking training cautioned that deterrence approaches such as heavy-handed takedowns could undermine the ability to develop a criminal case that would be more likely to punish owners and unravel and disrupt the illicit networks that IMBs are part of. A local law enforcement officer explained that undercover operations must have goals broader than shutting down an IMB. “We run our undercover operations to gain intelligence and find the crimes that we need to prosecute. But if we started going in there and making arrests, things change.” He clarified that the undercover operation would need to follow key players, particularly tracking where they are depositing money. “If we start doing overt business inspections with uniformed officers or if we start arresting the girls right after the undercover operations, that paper trail on the money is going to go away, they’re [perpetrators] going to be careful. We don’t want them to be careful, we want them to be lazy, that way we can get our evidence” (Local Law Enforcement, State 3).

Law enforcement interviewees also explained that arrests or shutdowns through civil injunctions did little to deter IMBs from operating because prosecutors do not take these measures seriously and judges do not create lasting accountability for IMB operators:

What type of respect are you going to get from a judge walking somebody in there? Not even just to the judge, but to the prosecutor? First, you have to convince a local prosecutor that this is worth your time. They’re going to look at it like, ‘why are we wasting valuable prosecution time for something like that’” (Federal Law Enforcement, State 2).

When true penalties for IMB operators are not forthcoming, there is little incentive to stop engaging in commercial sex operations. Shutdowns simply become a cost of doing business, and IMB operators easily replace arrested providers with new potential victims. As one prosecutor noted, “so there’s no penalty or incentive, not to open up somewhere else and then wait for me to shut them down there” (Local Prosecution, State 1). Human trafficking laws were intended to provide the types of larger penalties needed to create disincentives to IMBs and other facilities for commercial sex, but prosecutors rarely secure trafficking convictions following IMB takedowns because the evidence of force, fraud, or coercion is difficult to obtain (see also Farrell et al., 2019). As a result, investigators and prosecutors might be more inclined to prosecute for the readily available evidence of illicit behaviors. As one police officer explains:

“The tendency for the investigator is to, you know, grab the evidence that’s readily available, and she, the woman that’s running the massage parlor, is readily available so that must be my trafficker, and that may be the case, she may be a trafficker. But it may also be that she is a part of the trafficker network.” ... “So it’s probably more complex than what they’ve discovered” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1).

Despite recognizing the limitations of the current response, the interviews describe institutional factors that impede a more targeted approach. In line with the aforementioned organizational structure and institutional barriers that shape the current

response, an investigation following a shutdown appears to have less organizational priority: “A lot of police agencies will say we’re not going to mess around with this, we’ve got these other crimes to focus on” (Local law enforcement, State 3). Especially local law enforcement and specialized human trafficking officers expressed concern about how a limited prioritization for a long-term response to IMBs reduces the investment needed for more catastrophic disruptions of illicit operations.

The Need for a New Approach

In response to frustration about the limited number of human trafficking investigations and prosecutions (see also Farrell et al., 2014, 2019), some interviewees suggest moving beyond shutdowns and arrests. A majority of the respondents proposed a more coordinated, specialized, and targeted investigative response: “You can’t go in and investigate this as vice prostitution, shut it down, and go on with life. So, you have to assign someone as a human trafficking investigator” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). A targeted response should address the interconnectivity between IMBs, which – according to some interviewees – necessitates an organized crime approach. As a local officer explains, “I don’t necessarily need force, fraud, and coercion. I need an illicit sex act and acting as an organization, and I can charge it as racketeering” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). Another officer highlights a similar approach: “We’re hoping at some point that through working the organized crime and the money laundering angle, that we will make ... more conclusive connections where we can actually take that network down” (Local Law Enforcement, State 1).

A common theme across the interviews, was the need for an attitudinal change towards victims “to make sure they’re okay”, and that police are “treating them with respect and not interrogating them like criminals” (Local Prosecution, State 2). The general aspiration for a victim-centered approach was most strongly expressed among (female) local police officers and victim service agencies partnering with law enforcement. However, what interviewees perceived to qualify as a victim-centered approach varied. For example, a federal law enforcement officer highlighted the necessity of a victim services advocate in what yet appears to be an hours-long interrogation strategy: “And then I go in hours later and talk to her or I bring my victim services advocate and we just kinda talk to her for a couple of hours and then the girl is compliant and they [other law enforcement officers] are like, oh, that worked” (Federal law enforcement, State 1). In contrast, several detectives, especially those with specialized human trafficking expertise, explained the necessity of changing how vice units approach human trafficking in IMBs:

So, when we first initiated our trafficking unit and we were investigating massage parlors, what we realized was that if we went into massage parlors and ... we arrested the subject that was committing the prostitution, the thought was that if we sat them down and we talked to them, and they were a victim, they would self-identify, and we’d know the crime. But what we learned was that this was not the case at all (Local Law Enforcement, State 1).

Along similar lines, another detective with specialized human trafficking expertise explains that new approaches are needed for interviewing victims if police hope to get the information necessary to build a trafficking case:

"You cannot go with the old interrogation approach that I was taught way back ... You have to talk to the individual about the individual. What I know from my investigations here is that there are an inordinate amount of violent crimes happening inside of these places to these women" (Local Law Enforcement, State 3).

Another local law enforcement officer underscored the need for a trauma-informed response: "I'm not trying to make them therapists, I'm trying ... to have them understand what they're going through and how to approach it" (Local Law Enforcement, State 1). As such, there is a need to involve victim service agencies or train law enforcement to refer people into services.

Involving service provider partners requires that complaints be handled in a less sporadic way such that each "police department [knows] what the protocol is" (Local Prosecution, State 2) regarding appropriate responses to commercial sex and concerns about human trafficking victimizations. These types of responses might require a "large, coordinated task force" (State Law Enforcement, State 2) that also involves stakeholders outside of the criminal justice system, including service providers. Other stakeholders are local place managers such as property owners or owners of adjacent businesses in addition to a broader community. Compared to other non-apprehension tactics, community outreach was frequently highlighted as an important next step to gain a better understanding of the problem or for law enforcement as a way to gain trust and legitimacy: "[I]f we were to have more of a presence there, at least with just their leadership, meet with them on a regular basis, talk about who we are" (Local Law Enforcement, State 3).

In addition, around a third of the interviewees emphasized the need for greater awareness on the connectivity of the commercial sex industry to crimes such as human trafficking. Some highlighted the need for a cultural change among a broader community of buyers: "If tomorrow we could snap our fingers and make all the massage parlors go away: It would not eliminate this problem, it is going to take a cultural change ... tomorrow I could have times ten the number of agents I had doing it, it would not solve the problem" (Local Law Enforcement, State 1).

Altogether, while nearly all interviews underscore the widespread use of traditional law enforcement tactics with the ultimate aim of shutting down IMBs, interviewees universally express skepticism about the current response. However, the use of alternative models that are problem-oriented, victim-centered, and engage partners outside of the criminal justice system is still in its infancy and varies by state, locality, capacity, agency type, and individual motivation.

Discussion

As police are increasingly called upon to respond to growing human trafficking concerns (Farrell et al., 2015; Farrell & Cronin, 2015), they predominately rely on traditional means of policing, specifically vice tactics. This study sought to understand why police continue to use these tactics, despite known concerns about their limited effectiveness and potential harm for victims of human trafficking in IMBs (Farrell et al., 2019; Jurek & King, 2020; Wilson & Dalton, 2008). Through in-depth interviews with 44 law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and service agencies partnering with police in three

U.S. states, we identified overall homogeneity in respondents' data regarding three key themes.

First, the interviews document that citizen complaints motivate the police to respond to human trafficking in IMBs, which is consistent with the generally reactive response, driven by citizen calls, to human trafficking (Farrell & Cronin, 2015; Irwin, 2017; Jurek & King, 2020) and crime in general (Goldstein, 1990; Lum et al., 2020; Reiss, 1971). Because calls about IMBs have risen in response to public awareness about human trafficking, study participants described how increased pressure on the police to manage public complaints takes away focus and capacity for investigations that would more permanently disrupt human trafficking operations in IMBs.

Second, the interviews indicate how pre-existing organizational structures and institutional barriers explain the use of traditional law enforcement strategies. Citizen concerns about human trafficking are often delegated to existing operational units that historically have shaped the police response to vice problems (see also Farrell & Cronin, 2015; Hubbard, 2013). Although some agencies have created specialized units to prioritize the response to human trafficking, vice tactics such as sting operations, undercover investigations, and large-scale arrests of IMB operators or clientele dominate the police responses to human trafficking concerns in IMBs. These general deterrence strategies employ the police as apprehension agents (Nagin, 2013; Nagin et al., 2015) whose reactive response is supposed to signal the certainty of apprehension (Goldstein, 1990; Reiss, 1971). Interviewees agreed that the ultimate goal of apprehension strategies was to shut down IMBs and that shutdowns were a direct approach to addressing human trafficking and exploitation concerns.

Police infrequently used situational crime prevention efforts that rely on police as sentinel agents and address underlying conditions that are conducive to crime (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Nagin, 2013; Nagin et al., 2015), sometimes through regulatory approaches (Eck, 2015; Mazerolle & Ransley, 2006). Few local law enforcement officers and prosecutors used licensing and nuisance abatements to prevent massage parlors from operating illegitimately or used crime prevention tactics such as proactive investigations to unravel illicit networks or target property owners.

In addition, while police commonly mentioned their aspiration to be victim-oriented and underscored the need to partner with victim service and community-based organizations, these aspirations did not imply a shift away from using reactive vice tactics. Nonetheless, officers with specialized human trafficking training and victim service providers highlighted the need to move away from the "old interrogation approach" to implement a more trauma-informed approach to human trafficking victimizations.

Third, across the three study sites, study participants expressed significant concerns about the effectiveness of the current police response to human trafficking. Although shutdowns and arrests were proposed as an order maintenance strategy, interviewees regularly referred to whack-a-mole effects as the continuing re-emergence of IMBs after a shutdown. The interviews also reveal skepticism about deterrence effects because shutdowns were rarely followed up by human trafficking investigations and prosecutions, thus signaling little risk for traffickers and leaving human trafficking victimizations unrecognized. Following prior research on human trafficking (Farrell et al., 2019; Irwin, 2017; Jurek & King, 2020), long-term investigations that are necessary to

collate the evidence for force, fraud, and coercion was met with little organizational priority and capacity. Instead, several interviews document the inclination to investigate and prosecute individual commercial sex offenses with the readily available evidence. Efforts to strategically target specific places, identify key actors in illicit networks, or secure the evidence necessary to prove human trafficking were uncommon.

Although police continue to recycle vice strategies in responses to human trafficking in IMBs, prior research had already raised concerns about the ineffectiveness of vice tactics that focus on prostitution offenses and signal little accountability for traffickers as human trafficking investigations and prosecutions remain behind (Axon et al., 2019; see also Farrell et al., 2014, 2019). In addition, vice tactics can be harmful as they exacerbate trauma among trafficked persons who face the risk of being arrested and charged with prostitution offenses (e.g. Ebbert, 2019; Farrell et al., 2019; Sharp, 2017). Furthermore, the lack of victim services for IMB staff aligns with prior research that has shown that trafficked persons within marginalized communities, which also include IMB staff, face an increased risk of not being identified as victims (Bryant-Davis & Tummala-Narra, 2017; Fehrenbacher et al., 2020; Musto, 2016). Without specialized training and a structural investment within police departments to prioritize human trafficking investigations, police may conflate different facets of human trafficking with vice problems, document fraud, or smuggling where they have more familiarity and experience (Farrell et al., 2019; Irwin, 2017). Moreover, the current response to human trafficking in IMBs does not seem to address, and may even exacerbate, the socio-economic vulnerabilities among IMB staff who are often not receiving victim services or may not have alternative means of employment after a shutdown. Similarly, although police did not discuss immigration and detention as primary enforcement strategies, the lack of immigration advocacy and efforts to secure safe employment for IMB staff, many of whom are foreign nationals and sometimes without lawful status, is another potentially harmful corollary of the traditional approach.

Furthermore, the policing literature has demonstrated that traditional police responses such as reactive enforcement and retroactive investigation do not have crime-reducing effects (Weisburd & Majmudar, 2018) when they are not coupled with a variety of tools and partners to alter risk perceptions and diminish crime opportunities (Braga & Weisburd, 2010; Nagin et al., 2015). Problem-oriented strategies that address the underlying conditions of crime and engage with a broader community and social services are more effective (Eck, 2015; Weisburd & Eck, 2004). Although the interviews demonstrate that some localities had tried crime-prevention strategies, proactive efforts that engage police officers as sentinel agents were infrequently used.

The current study contributes to prior work by examining why police continue to rely on traditional policing tactics despite empirical support for alternative crime prevention and crime control strategies and widespread skepticism about the current response to IMBs. The influx of public complaints and pre-existing organizational structures and routines, especially within vice units, impedes innovation towards new crime response strategies. In addition, while police aspire a victim-oriented approach, the current strategy, which also involves arrests of victims, is at odds with victim support and may have harmful consequences for victims and police legitimacy. Without

institutional support for proactive approaches and an attitudinal change within police departments, shutdowns may become a mere cost of doing business, with human trafficking victimizations going unnoticed.

To guide further research, a few limitations need to be considered. First, this study examines perspectives on the police response to human trafficking in IMBs in only three states in the U.S. Police agencies in other states may have different approaches or views on the effectiveness of policing human trafficking in IMBs. Despite consistent findings on concerns, traditional policing, and limited effectiveness of vice tactics across the three study sites, future research may assess differences in perspectives by region. Additionally, larger samples would allow for more in-depth analyses of potential gender differences within law enforcement and other stakeholders in perceptions about strategies to address sex trafficking and IMBs, given that prior work has highlighted gender differences in support for specific types of anti-trafficking strategies (Bouché & Wittmer, 2015; de Vries et al., 2020). Second, while interviews with practitioners involved in IMB interventions allowed us to examine motivations for and perceived effectiveness of the current response against IMBs, future research should explore the impact of these actions on IMB staff and potentially trafficked persons. Qualitative research based on interviews with IMB staff may further explore the health and socio-economic impacts of IMB shutdowns and arrests. Third, although this study explains why police continue to rely on traditional policing tactics in responses to human trafficking, future research is needed to examine which approaches are effective at reducing trafficking.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this research adds further depth to prior literature on using traditional policing tactics against human trafficking by revealing shared concerns about the limited effects of these tactics on order maintenance and deterrence while identifying the structural challenges that impede police innovation. When addressing these challenges, IMBs may provide a useful example for police to innovate around proactive and problem-oriented approaches and move away from traditional policing tactics to respond to new priorities such as human trafficking.

The findings unambiguously call for alternative strategies. When police are involved, the interviews highlight the need for more proactive, strategic, and problem-oriented approaches, which the extant policing literature has deemed more effective than traditional reactive policing (Lum et al., 2020; Weisburd & Eck, 2004; Weisburd & Majmundar, 2018). Although police chiefs increasingly recognize that shutdowns and arrests are not enough and advocate for proactive policing, police agencies do not seem to have the infrastructure needed for police proactivity (Lum et al., 2020). For example, proactivity is not systematically recorded in police agencies, while arrest-based interventions and other reactive responses are continuously tracked in dispatch systems, which institutionalize and reward reactive policing efforts (Lum et al., 2020; Lum & Koper, 2017). Adapting reactive policing requires, as such, a structural change within police agencies to divert human and technical resources to proactive policing (Lum et al., 2020). Thus, changing the current police response to human trafficking in IMBs requires institutional changes, including a structural prioritization of sex and labor trafficking to build and record investigations, preventive approaches, and partnerships. To that end, the response to human trafficking in IMBs needs to be

delegated to other units than vice units. In addition to specialized units investigating sexual and labor exploitation in IMBs, organized crime units may have the expertise to unravel the suspected illicit networks further.

The interviews also highlight the need for alternative approaches that engage various stakeholders, including agencies and community partners outside of the criminal justice system. Not only are collaborative efforts promising considering the empirical evidence on effective proactive policing tactics that engage community-based partnerships (Weisburd & Eck, 2004; Weisburd & Majmundar, 2018), they allocate resources to agencies outside the criminal justice system. Critically, victim service agencies and organizations representing the well-being of IMB staff may foster a victim-oriented approach that offers more meaningful support and alternatives for IMB staff. When not being offered victim services or alternative means of employment, shutdowns without accountability against the traffickers might worsen a vulnerability to human trafficking victimizations. Furthermore, considering the historically poor and complex relationship between police and the commercial sex industry (Farrell et al., 2019; Wilson & Dalton, 2008), the criminal justice system may not be the appropriate system to respond to sex trafficking. Alternative response models may be informed by empirical research on the primary role of legal advocacy and community organizations to guide trauma-informed responses (e.g. Gerassi et al., 2017) and secure safe and fair working environments with limited opportunities to exploit, for example through regulatoriness and inspectional services and wage and hour regulations.

Altogether, by identifying why and how police use traditional law enforcement tactics to respond to human trafficking concerns in IMBs despite also perceiving their limited effectiveness, the current study suggests breaking down existing policing routines and perceptions for a more effective and comprehensive anti-trafficking approach. Problem-oriented, preventive, targeted, and collaborative efforts need to replace traditional policing tactics that do not seem to prevent violence and victimization in IMBs.

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