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Detecting and Responding: The Role of Youth Workers in Tackling Human Trafficking

by

Nadine Andriesse

2653133

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Supervisor: Jantien Van Berkel

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This thesis has been written as a study assignment under the supervision of an Utrecht University teacher. Ethical permission has been granted for this thesis project by the ethics board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Utrecht University, and the thesis has been assessed by two university teachers. However, the thesis has not undergone a thorough peer-review process so conclusions and findings should be read as such.

Abstract

Human trafficking remains a hidden yet urgent issue in the Netherlands, with young people particularly vulnerable to forms of criminal and sexual exploitation. While youth workers are uniquely positioned to detect and respond to early signs of trafficking, their role in this context remains underexplored. This qualitative study investigates how youth workers detect and respond to suspected cases of human trafficking.

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with youth workers from various regions and organisational contexts across the Netherlands. Thematic analysis revealed that detection relies heavily on trust-based relationships with youth, through which subtle signs and disclosures can emerge. However, detection is often complicated by the ambiguity of victimhood, social norms, and institutional blind spots. In responding to human trafficking, youth workers must balance their commitment to youth with external demands from formal systems (e.g. law enforcement, municipalities). Key themes include the strategic protection of trust-based relationships, the barriers of collaboration in siloed systems, and the moral dilemmas involved.

Although this study is based on youth workers who volunteered to participate and shared their own experiences, which may not represent all views, it provides rich insights into how they detect and respond to human trafficking. This is the first study to use an interdisciplinary lens to explore this issue in the Dutch context, showing the need to go beyond standard procedures and invest in relational, and well-supported youth work as a frontline defence.

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Introduction

Problem statement

Despite growing global concern, human trafficking remains a complex and often invisible problem, even in developed countries like the Netherlands. It involves the exploitation of individuals through coercion or deceit for purposes such as sexual exploitation, forced labour, and criminal activities (Hussein, 2015). It is one of the most severe violations of human rights, stripping individuals of their autonomy, dignity and freedom. Victims often endure inhumane conditions, physical and psychological abuse and violation of their basic rights. Beyond individual suffering, trafficking has broad societal impacts, including social exclusion, economic inequality, and the violation of human rights (Ottisova et al., 2016). These alarming realities underscore that human trafficking is a critical societal issue that requires deeper exploration to inform effective responses.

In the Netherlands, human trafficking may not initially appear to be a prominent issue, but it is in fact a significant concern. Vulnerable young people are especially at risk (Mercera et al., 2024). Recent findings indicate that as many as 1 in 8 young people in the Netherlands may be recruited into criminal activities, with signs that this trend is worsening (van den Berg & Rekers, 2021). The Netherlands has made efforts to combat trafficking through legislation, victim support programs, and awareness campaigns (Nationaal Rapporteur Mensenhandel, 2024). Nevertheless, human trafficking remains a hidden and complex issue, partly because official statistics capture only a fraction of the true scale. Estimates suggest that the actual number of victims, particularly minors, is far higher than reported. In 2023, the National Rapporteur registered only 52 cases minor victims of human trafficking, yet estimates from the Centre Against Child Trafficking and Exploitation (CKM), suggest that the true number could reach into the thousands annually for criminal exploitation alone (Leito et al., 2022).

Other forms of exploitation are not even included in this estimate. This discrepancy highlights the hidden nature of the crime and the difficulties in accurately measuring its prevalence, emphasising the critical need for enhanced detection strategies and specialised training among professionals.

Young people are especially vulnerable to trafficking due to their age and inexperience. Traffickers often exploit their need for security, belonging, or financial stability through manipulation or coercion. The psychological impact can be severe, with many victims experiencing long-term trauma, depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues (English, 2015). This not only affects their immediate well-being but also hinders their future development, reinforcing cycles of marginalisation and social exclusion (Nodzenski et al., 2024; Villacampa & Torres, 2017). These risks highlight the importance of monitoring and early intervention.

Youth workers, positioned on the frontline of youth support, play a critical role in detecting and responding to cases of human trafficking. Despite their unique access to vulnerable youth, their role in detection and responding remains underexplored in academic research. Leito et al. (2022) found that while 60% of youth workers had suspected trafficking cases, only 32% knew the appropriate steps to take. This gap between detection and responding underscores both the practical and knowledge-based barriers that has received limited scientific attention. Although some studies highlight the importance of frontline workers in combating trafficking (e.g. Browne-James et al., 2021; Lloyd et al., 2023), specific empirical insight into the role and needs of youth workers remains scarce. This lack of clarity in how youth workers are positioned may contribute to missed intervention opportunities and ongoing vulnerability among youth.

Given the estimated scale of the issue and the critical yet underexamined role of youth workers, it is crucial to address this gap in detecting and responding. This study, conducted in

collaboration with the Netherlands Red Cross, Human Trafficking Department, aims to explore how youth workers detect and respond to human trafficking. The findings will provide valuable insights into the steps that can be taken to better equip youth workers to detect and respond to trafficking, ultimately enhancing support for vulnerable youth and improving intervention strategies.

State of the art

Human trafficking is defined by the United Nations as ‘’the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons through force, fraud, or coercion, for the purpose of exploitation’’ (United Nations, n.d.). In the Netherlands, human trafficking is defined through four official forms: sexual exploitation, labour exploitation, criminal exploitation and forced organ removal (Nationaal Rapporteur Mensenhandel, n.d.). Sexual exploitation often forces individuals into prostitution or other forms of commercial sexual acts (Becklett & Walker, 2016). Labour exploitation refers to coercing people to work under inhumane conditions (Strauss, 2012). Criminal exploitation involves forcing victims into illegal activities such as drug trafficking, theft, or fraud, leaving them at risk of legal consequences (Baidawi et al., 2020). Due to the hidden nature of trafficking, comprehensive data are limited, especially for forced organ removal. This form is rarely identified in the Netherlands (de Jong, 2017).

While youth workers are positioned at the intersection of education, social services, and community support, empirical research focussing specifically on their role in trafficking detection and response is limited. Most existing studies on human trafficking tend to focus on law enforcement, global issues or estimated victims (e.g. Wozniak-Cole, 2024; Durgana & van Dijk, 2021; Stöckl et al., 2021). There is comparatively little attention to the preventive and identificatory potential of youth workers. A few studies indicate that youth workers often do not feel equipped to respond effectively due to unclear organisational protocols or the complexity of cases (Leito et al., 2022; Khadraoui et al., 2020). Furthermore, a study from

Martinho et al. (2020) has highlighted the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration in tackling trafficking, but youth workers frequently encounter barriers, as research from Leito et al. (2022) shows. They often do not know who to turn to of what steps to take, and in many cases, adequate structures or protocols are still lacking (Khadraoui et al., 2020).

Trafficking of minors is not only a legal or social issue but also a profound psychological one. Victims often suffer complex trauma that can manifest in behavioural issues, mistrust of adults, emotional withdrawal, and resistance to intervention (Vollinger & Campbell, 2020). These factors can be easily misinterpreted or overlooked by unaware professionals. Youth workers, many of whom develop long-term relationships with young people, are uniquely positioned to identify subtle behavioural shifts that could indicate underlying exploitation. Research from Davidson et al. (2011) revealed that clarity of work roles and efficacy predicted a stronger relationship with youth, which in turn can enhance early identification and timely intervention in cases of exploitation. In addition to their offline role, the online presence of youth workers has become increasingly valuable in fostering connections with young people. Being accessible through digital platforms allows youth workers to engage with youth in spaces where they spend a significant amount of time. This presence not only helps build trust and continuity in the relationship, but also creates opportunities for early detection and support, particularly for those who may find it difficult to seek help in an offline setting (Hamdiui & van den Broek, 2019).

Taken together, the existing literature highlights a significant gap in understanding how youth workers perceive, experience, and respond to human trafficking in their practice. While general awareness may be growing, empirical insight into the specific challenges, doubts, and decision-making process youth workers face remains limited. There is a lack of clarity on how suspicions arise, the barriers to acting on them, and the contextual or organisational factors that influence responses. This study addresses that gap by exploring youth workers' lived

experiences in detecting and responding to trafficking. By deepening understanding of their perspectives and needs, this research aims to contribute to the development of knowledge that better supports youth workers in this crucial role.

Theoretical framework

To create a better understanding of how youth workers detect and respond to human trafficking, this study draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and the Capability Approach (CA). These perspectives allow for an in-depth understanding of both the personal and structural dimensions that shape professional behaviour. SCT highlights the role of personal beliefs, self-efficacy and social learning in shaping youth workers' actions. Meanwhile, the CA offers a perspective to examine whether youth workers genuinely have the freedom, resources, and institutional support to act. While SCT focuses on individual agency and the cognitive mechanisms behind behaviour, the CA draws attention to the broader conditions, such as policy, and institutional norms. By combining these frameworks, the study captures both the internal motivations and external conditions youth workers face, offering a more complete view of the professional context in which they work.

Social Cognitive Theory

The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Albert Bandura (1986) offers a framework for understanding the behavioural dynamics of youth workers as they navigate the challenges of detecting and responding to youth trafficking. At its core, SCT emphasises the mutual interaction between personal factors, behavioural patterns, and environmental influences. In this model, human agency is not just a reaction to outside influences. It is shaped by personal beliefs, experiences and social context. SCT explains this through reciprocal determinism,

where behaviour, personal factors, and the environment all interact and influence each other (O'Brien & Preble, 2023).

One of the central constructs within SCT is self-efficacy: an individual's belief in their ability to take the actions needed to reach a goal. This concept is particularly relevant in the context of youth work, where detecting the subtle signs of trafficking takes more than just knowledge. Youth workers also need the confidence to understand behaviours, take action, and engage with other agencies. Youth workers may possess the necessary awareness, but if they lack self-efficacy, they may hesitate to act or defer to others, especially in complex cases (Waddington, 2023). In addition to self-efficacy, observational learning is another key aspect of SCT. Youth workers often learn how to navigate sensitive situations by observing colleagues, supervisors, or institutional norms (Asakura et al., 2022). In environments where open discussion, peer support, and modelling of best practices are encouraged, professionals are more likely to develop the skills and confidence required to intervene effectively. Conversely, in settings where trafficking is rarely discussed or where responses are unclear or inconsistent, opportunities for experiential learning and growth are limited (Johnson, 2020). SCT also draws attention to outcome expectations. This is what individuals believe will result from their actions. If youth workers perceive that reporting concerns will not lead to meaningful outcomes, or that they may face negative consequences (e.g. professional risk, bureaucratic resistance), they may be less likely to act, regardless of their level of concern or training. The perceived consequences of speaking up or intervening directly influence whether action is taken (Cavey et al., 2023).

Applying SCT to this context helps the research explore how individual beliefs, social influences and institutional environments interact in shaping how youth workers detect and respond to human trafficking. It allows for a nuanced understanding of how youth workers'

actions are shaped. Not just by what they know, but by how they interpret and respond to the perceived risks, supports, and expectations within their professional contexts.

Capability Approach

The Capability Approach (CA), developed by Amartya Sen (1992) and expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2011), provides a valuable framework for examining the professional realities of youth workers in the context of detecting and responding to human trafficking. Rather than focusing solely on resources or outcomes, the CA emphasises individuals' real freedoms, their ability to be and do what they value. In youth work, this means looking beyond formal responsibilities to whether workers are truly enabled to protect vulnerable youth. Applied to this context, the CA helps assess youth workers' capabilities such as detecting signs of trafficking, knowing how to act, and collaborating with other professionals. These skills depend not only on personal motivation but also on work place conditions, including unclear policies, limited multidisciplinary support, and lack or role clarity.

Drawing on Charnley & Nkhoma's (2020) study with girls and young women in Malawi, a similar tension emerges around agency and structural constraints. The authors describe how young people often operate within extreme limitations. This is what the CA calls unfreedoms, such as poverty, gender inequality, and cultural expectations. These constraints result in what Nussbaum (2001) terms adaptive preferences, where individuals make choices that reflect their limited options, rather than true aspirations. This insight is also highly relevant for youth workers, whose professional choices may be similarly shaped by institutional barriers or lack of support.

The CA also draws attention to conversion factors: the institutional, social, and personal conditions that shape how resources become real capabilities. For instance, a youth worker's training (a resource) may only translate into effective action if personal motivation (personal

factor), supportive team culture (social factor), and clear protocols (institutional factor) align. The CA helps explain why certain barriers persist formal interventions, and shifts attention to the broader systems that enable or restrict professional practice.

Using the CA as a theoretical lens allows this research to move beyond questions of access and knowledge, examining how structural conditions affect youth workers' real freedom to act in the best interests of youth. It shifts the focus from what youth workers have to what they are actually able to do, offering a foundation to explore the systemic factors shaping their ability to detect and respond to trafficking.

In summary, this framework integrates SCT and the CA to better understand youth workers' roles in detecting and responding to human trafficking. The conceptual model (Figure 1) links SCT's environmental factors with the CA's conversion factors, connects personal factors to both conversion and agency, and aligns behaviour with functionings. This integration shows that youth workers' actions are shaped not only by their beliefs and skills but also by the social and institutional conditions that support or hinder them. Together, these perspectives offer a comprehensive view of both individual and structural influences shaping youth workers' actions.

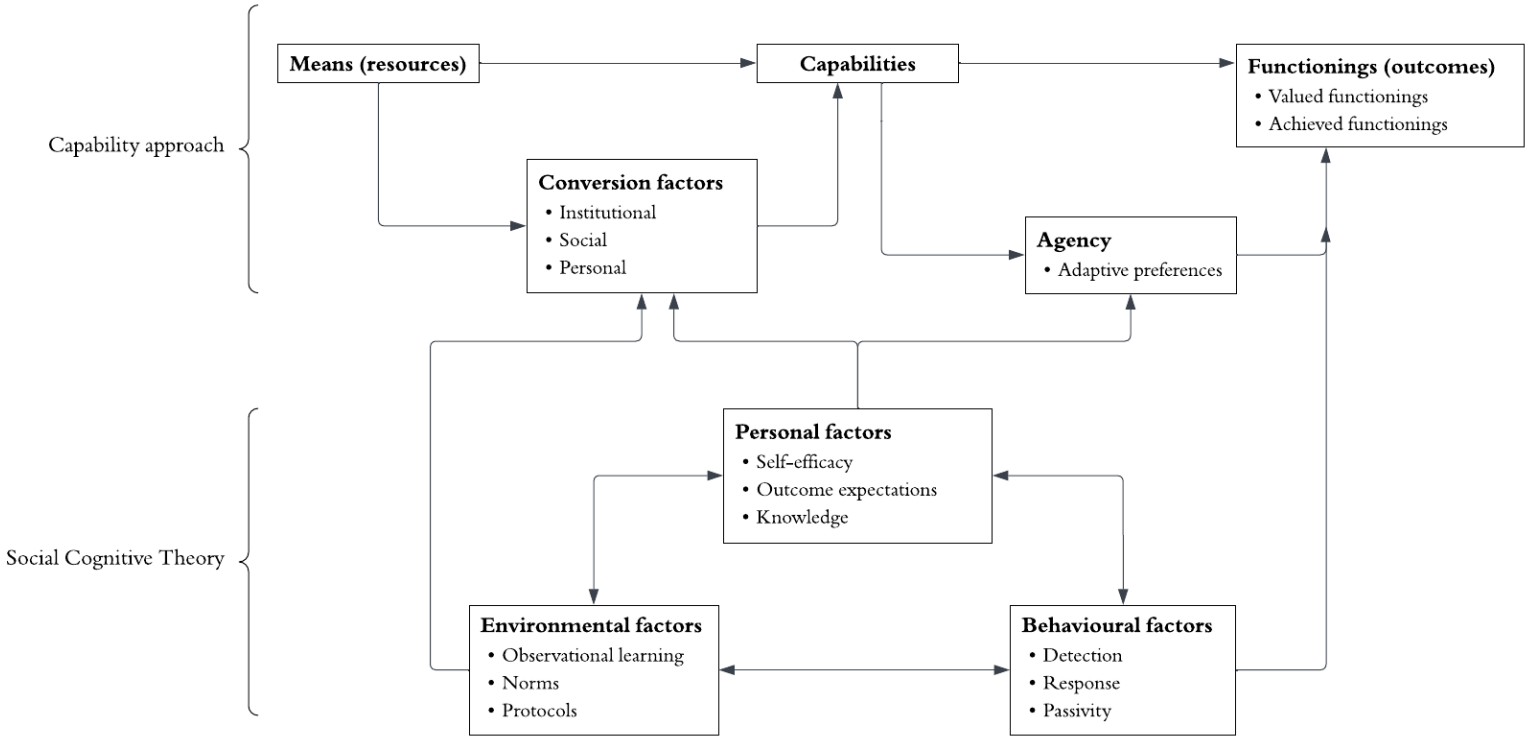

Figure 1: Conceptual model

Research questions

Given the complex and hidden nature of human trafficking, particularly among minors, and the crucial yet underexplored role of youth workers in early detection and responding, this study seeks to understand how youth workers detect and respond to human trafficking. Building on the theoretical insights, the research aims to uncover both individual and systemic processes that influence youth workers' actions. The central research question guiding this study is:

How do youth workers detect and respond to suspected cases of human trafficking?

To explore this overarching question, the following sub-questions will be addressed:

- What shapes youth workers' ability to detect possible signs of human trafficking?
- What shapes youth workers' responses when they suspect a case of human trafficking?

Methods

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design, which was well-suited to understand more about how youth workers detect and respond to suspected cases of human trafficking. The exploratory nature of the research allowed for an in-depth and nuanced understanding of participant's perspectives on youth trafficking in their work context (Lim, 2025).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen to facilitate a flexible, yet focused conversation, enabling the exploration of specific areas of interest while also allowing participants the freedom to raise topics they considered important. In contrast to focus groups, individual interviews provided a private setting where participants could speak openly (Guest et al., 2017). This approach also minimised the influence of group dynamics and was more practical in terms of scheduling, as it allowed for greater flexibility in arranging interviews based on individual availability.

Study sample

Participants were recruited through a combination of open calls, existing professional networks, and snowball sampling. Youth workers from diverse organisations and regions across the Netherlands were invited to participate, with the aim of ensuring diversity in geographic location (urban, suburban, and rural), organisational contexts, and levels of experience. No specific background was required for participation, allowing for broad inclusion and a wide range of perspectives to emerge. This form of purposive convenience sampling was chosen to be able to capture a broad range of experiences of professionals operating in different contexts, offering rich insights into the variety of ways in which youth workers encounter and respond to suspected trafficking. The only inclusion criterion was that

participants were active youth workers working in community-based, outreach, or informal settings. This ensured the relevance and depth of their insights in relation to the study's focus.

Through selecting different recruiting areas, efforts were made to include youth workers from both large cities and smaller towns or villages, in order to capture regional variation. In total, 12 participants took part in the study. They were based in diverse locations including Noord-Holland, Zuid-Holland, Noord-Brabant, Utrecht, Gelderland and Limburg. While no participants were recruited from the northern provinces, the sample included professionals from a wide range of community-based organisations, varying in size, structure, and target groups.

Data collection

Data collection took place from April 2nd to May 28th, 2025. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Review Board of the Faculty of Social & Behavioural Sciences (25-0571). All participants signed an informed consent form, which outlined the purpose of the study, procedures, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence (Appendix A).

A total of 12 interviews were conducted, either in person or via Microsoft Teams. Where possible, in-person interviews took place on-site (2 interviews), offering the opportunity to observe the participants' working environments. In the 10 other cases, video calls were used due to practical constraints such as travel distance or scheduling limitations.

The interviews were guided by a topic list (Appendix B) developed in alignment with the study's research questions. Each interview began with a brief introduction, followed by open-ended questions aimed at exploring youth workers' daily practices, recognition of signs of exploitation, and the professional and systemic challenges they face. Questions also explored participants' current knowledge, their perceived ability to respond, and whether they had

received any relevant training or support. The interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and stored securely to ensure confidentiality. During transcription, the data were anonymised by removing identifying details such as names, locations, and organisational information.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic content analysis, incorporating both inductive and deductive elements. While the coding process was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge organically from participants' narratives, it was also informed by the study's research questions and relevant concepts from the literature. Transcripts were first read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the content. Initial codes were then developed based on recurring ideas and patterns in the data, rather than through a predefined coding framework. Coding was performed manually using qualitative data analysis software NVivo.

Through an iterative process, codes were compared, refined, and grouped into broader themes that reflected key patterns across the data (Appendix C). The analysis considered not only the content of participants' narratives but also the contextual factors surrounding their experiences, enabling a grounded and nuanced interpretation. To enhance the credibility of the findings, a member check was conducted, allowing participants to review and reflect on the preliminary interpretations of their input. This approach ensured that the analysis remained closely tied to participants' lived experiences while also aligning with the broader aims of the research.

Positionality

My position as a researcher with academic training in social sciences, but without direct professional experience as a youth worker, inevitably shaped the way I approached this topic, engaged with participants, and interpreted their narratives. While my external position allowed me to ask questions from a neutral, exploratory standpoint, it also required continuous self-awareness to ensure I did not project assumptions about youth work or youth trafficking onto participants' experiences. The member checks ensured that participants' perspectives were accurately represented and helped to validate the interpretations by providing opportunities for feedback and clarification. I remained conscious of the potential power dynamics during interviews, particularly given my role as a researcher and the sensitive nature of the subject matter. To mitigate this, I aimed to build rapport with participants keeping an open, non-judgemental stance and encouraging them to speak freely about their experiences. Emphasising confidentiality and giving participants space to lead parts of the conversation helped to foster trust and encourage honest conversations.

In summary, I approached the research with reflexivity and ethical responsibility, acknowledging my positionality and ensuring that the voices of youth workers remained central throughout the study.

Results

The findings presented shed light on how professionals detect signs of human trafficking among young people, and how they respond to these signs. Instead of presenting the data in a chronological or individualised manner, the analysis was organised thematically. This thematic approach was guided by recurring patterns across interviews. The findings are structured around two central categories that correspond to the study's sub-questions: (1) detecting human trafficking and (2) responding to suspected cases. Within each of these categories, a set of overarching themes emerged that were consistently reflected across participants' experiences. These themes reflect not only practical experiences, but also deeper, social, organisational, and ethical dynamics.

Detecting human trafficking

Across the interviews, all participants reported having encountered signs of possible youth trafficking in their work. Most often related to criminal activities such as drug trafficking or money muling. While some had experience with sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation was more frequently mentioned and more visibly recognised. Participants emphasised that signs are often subtle, fragmented, and embedded within everyday behaviour, making it difficult to identify without an established relationship of trust. Across the interviews, three central themes emerged regarding how youth workers detect signs of human trafficking: (1) social norms, (2) ambiguity of victimhood, and (3) structural and organisational systems.

Social norms

One of the most prominent themes across interviews was the powerful influence of social media and social norms on how young people experience and disclose exploitation. Youth workers described how, within many peer and cultural contexts, certain forms of criminal exploitation were not only normalised but at times even admired. Roles such as ‘’runner’’ or

‘’helper’’ in criminal networks were often seen as legitimate ways to earn money, gain social status, and build credibility, especially in socioeconomically marginalised environments. According to the youth workers, many youth saw these roles as voluntary or even aspirational, rather than viewing it as exploitative.

This framing is reinforced by peer dynamics and amplified through social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok. Youth workers described how curated glimpses of wealth, designer items, or coded references to street status creates a distorted image of success, glamorising lifestyles that were, in reality, very exploitative.

‘’But those guys’ world of experience, they were born in this era, so they don’t know any different. There was this boy who got stabbed, and the first thing he did was post it on social media instead of calling the ambulance. That’s how far it’s gone. Like, whoa… It’s gotten to the point where I think to myself, okay… I really think that status, and not being able to distance yourself from a certain group, will remain a huge challenge.” – P4

Even when young people did begin to recognise exploitation themselves, the youth workers indicated that disclosure was often hindered by a strong culture of silence rooted in loyalty, fear, and group identity. Within street-influenced peer groups in particular, a ‘’no snitching’’ norm discouraged any form of openness about harmful experiences. According to the youth workers, young people feared being labelled as disloyal or feared revenge, and this fear was compounded by feelings of shame or a desire to protect family or peers.

‘’There is so much pressure from within the groups themselves. Snitching was never popular, of course. It wasn’t popular twenty years ago either, but now it’s really a big issue. And if you get labelled like that… there’s obviously a risk involved.” – P3

This silence was further reinforced in communities where cultural or religious norms made conversations about exploitation and sexuality especially difficult. Several youth workers

noted that topics related to sexual behaviour, modesty, or family honour were considered taboo, making it hard to raise or address signs of sexual exploitation. This discomfort was often felt by both youth and professionals, leading to uncertainty about how or when to intervene.

''I also think that a lack of confidence in how to act plays a role for the workers. I always say, if you want to go deep with young people, then you also need to be able to openly engage in conversations about difficult topics like sexuality."– P11

Youth workers described how these intersecting norms made the early identification of trafficking particularly challenging. In many cases, the signs remains hidden, not because they were absent, but because the social context discouraged them from being seen. Building trust was described as a gradual and layered process, requiring time, consistency, and emotional availability. Unlike formal professionals who might appear only during crises, youth workers emphasised that their long-term, informal presence allowed them to notice subtle indicators and create conditions for disclosure.

''Then you come back to the whole street aspect, and the part about trust and the relationship you have with young people. Because even though they know what we do and what we're involved in, they still always want to share their story with someone. So through those conversations you end up finding out quite a lot."– P1

Ambiguity of victimhood

A recurring theme across the interviews was the difficulty youth workers encountered in detecting and responding to trafficking due to the ambiguous nature of victimhood. One of the key challenges in detecting trafficking was that many young people did not fit common or expected victim profiles. Instead, their involvement often appeared voluntary or complicit, which made signs of coercion or control less visible.

Youth workers noted that youth engaged in trafficking-related activities such as transporting drugs, handling money, or recruiting peers, were often perceived by others as perpetrators rather than potential victims. This framing significantly impacted how behaviours were interpreted. Rather than exploring the context behind a youth's involvement, institutions often responded to surface-level behaviours such as absenteeism or possession of illicit goods. These behaviours were frequently criminalised, rather than seen as potential indicators of deeper forms of control or exploitation. Youth workers emphasised that this mislabelling created blind spots in detection. When a young person is quickly categorised as a perpetrator, professionals stop looking for signs of coercion, grooming, or abuse.

''But I think a teacher at school with forty other students in the class just can't break it down like that. That teacher makes an observation. That is 'no, I saw you', and from there things start rolling. But then you label someone as a perpetrator, and that's a very different path than if someone were seen as a victim. I think that's why it's really difficult to say, okay, why can't this issue be expressed in numbers? I think they are more often seen as a dealer or a perpetrator than people look at, okay, how did you end up in this cycle, and how do you get out of it?" – P2

Moreover, according to youth workers, many young people themselves did not identify as victims, which further complicated recognition. Some framed their involvement in terms of loyalty or necessity, making it harder for professionals to probe deeper. In environments where survival strategies and exploitation overlap, the distinction between voluntary and forced involvement is often blurred. This ambiguity demands that youth workers look beyond binary labels of victim or perpetrator.

''And often they don't really see themselves as a victim, because at the start they also did something that allowed this to happen. But that often takes years, you know. It's also partly about admitting to yourself that you were used in a certain way." - P10

Structural and organisational systems

Youth workers identified several structural and organisational limitations that impacted their ability to effectively detect trafficking. While most did not describe themselves as underprepared, many emphasised that the fast-changing nature of trafficking dynamics, especially in relation to youth, requires ongoing and specialised training. Rather than basic awareness, they expressed a need for refresher courses and training tailored to youth work specifically. Training that addresses not only general signs of trafficking, but also the subtle, contextual, and often rapidly shifting indicators found in their field.

''I think that an occasional training or reminder is really helpful. Like, what are the signs, what should you be looking out for? It wouldn't be a bad idea to do that every now and then so that everyone has a clear picture again. Signs can change too, you know?" -P7

Another barrier was the way organisational priorities were structured. Trafficking was often not positioned as a central concern within broader agendas. More immediate or visible issues such as radicalisation, mental health, or school attendance tended to receive more focused attention, meaning that signs of exploitation could be missed or deprioritised in practice.

''There are plenty of things we need to focus on. We have so many goals, so many themes we need to address, that I can imagine this kind of fades into the background a bit." -P5

In addition, youth workers noted the lack of standardised tools or protocols for detecting trafficking. Without clear frameworks, detection often depends on the experience and instincts of individuals. This meant that recognition varied significantly between professionals, depending on their background, familiarity with the issue, and even personal worldview.

''We don't really have actual protocols, like something you can just pull up as a PDF and look at to say okay, this is the situation now." – P1

This reliance on personal interpretation made it difficult to ensure consistent responses, particularly in ambiguous cases. Several participants underlined the importance of bringing together multiple perspectives when concerns arose. They described collaborative reflection, such as discussing cases in teams as a crucial way to challenge assumptions and catch signs that one person alone might miss.

Responding to suspected cases

Participants described their responses to suspected trafficking not as clear-cut procedural steps, but as deeply relational, morally complex, and emotionally charged processes. Three central themes emerged in how youth workers navigated these situations: (1) trust as a foundation, (2) collaboration, and (3) moral agency. These themes reflect both internal professional values and the external structures that shape, limit, or enable action.

Trust as a foundation

Trust was consistently described as the foundation of youth work. Participants emphasised that without a strong, trust-based relationship, effective detection and response would be nearly impossible. Trust was not only essential in engaging young people, but also in maintaining the continuity of care.

> *''I always say, as youth workers we don't carry pepperspray on our belts, all we've got is trust. That's the real tool we bring to the streets: our way with words, our experience, and well, our responsibility."– P4*

At the same time, this trust is fragile and can be easily damaged, particularly when formal systems such as law enforcement are involved. Youth workers expressed a deep ambivalence towards engaging the police, not out of indifference, but due to the risk that it could jeopardise their relational position.

''It always feels a bit risky. You really have to know the right officers. The ones where you explain the situation without immediately leading to an arrest or something like that. […] If he gets arrested right away, yeah, then I've got a problem. Then it's like 'you set me up'." – *P1*

This reflects a broader moral tension: while formal reporting may be necessary for protection, it can also undermine the very conditions such as trust, safety and openness, that make youth work effective. Crucially, these decisions were not just about the individual relationship, but they also carried consequences for the youth worker's broader reputation and the credibility of their organisation. Several participants noted that one perceived misstep, such as an unwanted intervention or premature police involvement, could spread quickly through peer networks. If young people felt betrayed, not only the individual worker but the entire organisation could lose access to that community.

"You see, sometimes my position is more important than sharing the signal. And that can be really difficult, because if there's no trust in me as a youth worker anymore, then I might as well stop doing this job and go work somewhere else." – *P9*

In this way, trust is not a static condition but a strategic resource, one that youth workers must constantly negotiate and protect. Responding to exploitation therefore requires balancing action with caution, in a context where their own positionality is always at stake.

Collaboration

Closely linked to trust-based relationships is the need for professional networks that are equally grounded in mutual respect, reliability, and informal trust. Within their own teams, youth workers reported feeling supported. Internal collaboration allowed for meaningful discussions, peer reflection, and a shared sense of responsibility.

However, when it comes to external collaboration, particularly with law enforcement, schools and municipalities, many participants encountered structural barriers. Silos between institutions, limited information sharing (due to privacy regulations), and lack of follow-up left youth workers feeling isolated and unheard.

''Sometimes you have nowhere to report something, or you don't get any follow-up. That makes it frustrating too." P3

''Well, you do need cooperation, otherwise it gets really difficult. Then you're on your own. And yeah, then there's just no way to even start." -P1

Many participants rely on informal relationships with known and trusted partners to navigate these systems. Yet, this also leads to selective collaboration, where youth workers chose to work only with those who 'understand their world'. The need for mutual understanding of roles, language, and goals was repeatedly emphasised.

''I think it's more often about: do you really understand what I do? And do I really understand what you do? That's often where it comes down to. Because if you don't, you end up with blame. And blame leads to distrust. And distrust leads to miscommunication." – P4

Moral agency

Youth workers did not describe their responses as routine professional acts, but as deeply moral decisions made under uncertainty and emotional pressure. Their role was perceived as open-ended, requiring them to navigate ambiguous boundaries, both personally and professionally.

''We work with a focus on the neighbourhood, the system, and the individual. Every other care worker might drive home and simply let go. For us, a whole neighbourhood is at stake. […] Our position is always more sensitive than that of others." – P7

The absence of clear protocols or safety nets left some youth workers feeling solely responsible for the consequences of both taking action and doing nothing. Their emotional investment in young people's safety and futures weight heavily, especially when they felt unsupported by systems or lacked the authority to intervene.

''You do need cooperation, otherwise it gets really difficult. Then you're on your own." – P1

Participants framed this as a continuous practice of ethical decision making. Responding to suspected exploitation required navigating ambiguity, weighing risks, and taking responsibility in situations where guidelines were limited or absent. Rather than being paralysed by uncertainty, youth workers showed a strong sense of agency, but emphasised the importance of collective spaces for reflection and accountability. It was not individual resilience they lacked, but shared frameworks to process complex cases and coordinate responses beyond informal practices.

Discussion

Interpretation of findings

This study examined how youth workers in the Netherlands detect and respond to signs of human trafficking. Using a qualitative approach, it revealed that while youth workers often encounter suspected cases, especially of criminal exploitation, they face ambiguity in detection and systemic barriers in response. Detection is influenced by youth subcultures, normalisation of exploitation, and blurred boundaries around victimhood. Youth workers often rely on long-term trust-based relationships to recognise subtle or concealed signs, which are frequently missed or misread in more formal settings.

In terms of response, participants described navigating significant ethical dilemmas. While professional values such as trust, care, and reliability guide their work, youth workers face systemic barriers including fragmented collaboration, unclear protocols, and moral dilemmas. Their actions are shaped by a tension between safeguarding youth and maintaining their trust that enables meaningful engagement. These themes highlight the tension between the relational responsibilities youth workers take on in practice and the limited systemic support available to address concerns about exploitation.

Through the lens of Social Cognitive Theory, these findings reveal the central role of self-efficacy, observational learning, and outcome expectations in shaping professional action. Many youth workers expressed doubt about their ability to act effectively, even when aware of signs, reflecting low self-efficacy. This supports SCT's idea that confidence, rather than knowledge alone, is crucial for behaviour (Bandura, 1989). Observational learning was another key factor: environments where peer discussion and experiential knowledge-sharing occurred enabled stronger detection and response. Conversely, when trafficking was rarely

discussed in teams or training, youth workers had fewer opportunities to model or learn appropriate interventions.

Moreover, outcome expectations strongly influenced decision-making. Many youth workers believed that involving law enforcement could result in arrests or broken trust, thereby discouraging formal action. This reflects SCT's view that anticipated consequences shape behavioural choices. Importantly, these expectations were not only about system response, but also about relation risk: one misstep could influence the youth worker's standing within youth communities, reducing the trust their work depends on. This study extends SCT's application to a context of moral ambiguity and systemic distrust, showing how personal efficacy is closely linked to institutional culture and interprofessional dynamics.

The Capability Approach adds an additional layer, emphasising how environmental factors shape actual opportunities for action. Although youth workers may be formally responsible for detecting trafficking, their real capability to do so is often undermined by organisational ''unfreedoms''; vague protocols, lack of training, and institutional silos. For instance, even though training exists, it was often experienced as outdated or not tailored to real-world youth work, limiting its conversion into meaningful capabilities. This reflects Nussbaum's idea that having resources (e.g. training) does not guarantee the freedom to act (Nussbaum, 2011). Youth workers' ability to act was also constrained by fragmented professional networks and lack of shared decision-making structures. They did not just call for more tools, but for shared spaces for ethical reflection, and for stronger collective support that allows for thoughtful and coordinated responses in complex, ethically sensitive situations

Strengths and limitations

The study's grounded, qualitative approach provides an in-depth understanding of youth workers' lived experiences across diverse settings in the Netherlands. Including participants from various regions and organisational context enhanced the relevance and scope of the insights. Data saturation was achieved through iterative analysis and constant comparison, with no new themes emerging in the final stages. A key strength is the study's theoretical foundation, combining Social Cognitive Theory (from psychology) and the Capability Approach (from philosophy/ social policy) to examine the interplay between personal agency, relational dynamics, and structural conditions. This interdisciplinary framework, integrating perspectives from sociology, psychology, public policy, and social work, offers a nuanced view of how youth workers detect and respond to trafficking. It also deepens understanding of how they navigate moral ambiguity and institutional barriers, ensuring theoretical insights remain grounded in practice and relevant to both policy and professional development.

However, the study also has limitations. The sample, while diverse, may not represent all forms of youth work or regional variation. Participants were self-selected and may have been more engaged in the topic than others, introducing potential bias. Additionally, interviews focussed on self-reported behaviour, which may be affected by social desirability or recall limitations. Furthermore, the absence of perspectives from other stakeholders, such as trafficked youth, law enforcement, or municipalities, limits the comprehensiveness of the findings. This means that the results should be viewed with an awareness of the limitations. The findings mainly reflect the views of a specific group of motivated youth workers and do not give a fully representative picture or include the perspectives of other key people involved in youth trafficking cases. While the study offers important insights into how youth workers deal with this issue in practice, it may not show the full complexity of the problem in different areas or from other points of view.

Implications

Theoretically, this study demonstrates the value of combining SCT and CA to understand professional behaviour in morally complex, relational settings. SCT highlights individual beliefs and behaviours, while CA focuses on structural and institutional influences. Together, they offer a comprehensive view of frontline practice, showing how behaviour is both socially shaped and structurally constrained. This dual framework can inform research in other areas in frontline domains such as domestic violence, radicalisation, or school-based interventions.

Practically, the findings point to several urgent needs. First, youth workers require specialised, ongoing training that reflects the realities of their work, including recognition of digital grooming, cultural barriers to disclosure, and ambiguous victim-perpetrator dynamics. These trainings must go beyond awareness and focus on building confidence and self-efficacy.

Additionally, interprofessional collaboration must be improved. Structural silos, especially between youth work, law enforcement, schools and municipalities must be bridged with clearer protocols and trusted information-sharing practices. Policy frameworks should promote interdisciplinary reflection spaces where youth workers can discuss cases, consult other professionals, and clarify responsibilities.

Moral Case Deliberation (MCD) offers a way to strengthen ethical practice by enabling open discussion of real-life dilemmas. It fosters mutual understanding among professionals and helps navigate rigid protocols (Tan et al., 2017). MCD helps make ethical challenges visible, especially the vulnerable position youth workers can be in when facing complex trafficking cases. To support the structural embedding of such reflection practices, youth workers should also explore the role of work unions or professional covenants in advocating for ongoing support, inter-agency dialogue, and the time and resources needed to reflect and act with integrity (Farr, 2021).

Future research could employ mixed methods to triangulate findings or include perspectives from other professional stakeholders, such as law enforcement, schools, municipalities, and young people themselves, to better understand interprofessional dynamics. Including, for example, youth with lived experience or professionals involved in referral, care, or law enforcement could offer concrete insight into how collaboration can be improved in practice.

Conclusion

This study was aimed at exploring how youth workers detect and respond to suspected cases of human trafficking among young people in the Netherlands. Through in-depth interviews, the findings reveal that youth workers play a critical but complex role at the frontline of detection and intervention. Their work is deeply relational, with trust serving both as a key condition for recognising signs of exploitation and as a potential barrier to taking protective action. Youth workers operate in a context marked by moral ambiguity, fragmented collaboration, and limited structural support. Responding to trafficking involves not only knowledge and intention, but the ability to act within and against institutional constraints. The absence of clear protocols and the risk of damaging relationships shape professional behaviour. Trust is not only a value but a resource. One that youth workers must constantly negotiate, protect, and sometimes sacrifice.

These findings highlight the need for stronger ethical support, clearer guidance, and more integrated collaboration across sectors. Efforts to improve early detection and responding must go beyond raising awareness or updating protocols, they must also address the relational and moral complexity of frontline practice. Supporting youth workers requires recognising their critical role, listening to their lived challenges, and ensuring they have the tools and backing to act with care and confidence in situations where the stakes are high and the answers are rarely simple.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Consent form

CONSENT FORM for participation in:

Thesis research – From awareness to Action: Equipping Youth Professionals to Identify and Adress Human Trafficking

I hereby declare that:

- I have been adequately informed about the research through the information letter ;
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and these have been answered to my satisfaction;
- I have had sufficient time to carefully consider participation in this research;
- I voluntarily agree to participate.

I give permission for the following:

- The collected data will be used and sorted for scientific purposes as described in the information letter;
- Audio recordings will be made for scientific purposes.

I understand that:

- I have the right to withdraw my consent for the use of my data, as described in the information letter.

Participant name: _____

Signature: _____ Date, place: ___ / ___ / ____, _____

To be completed by the researcher conducting the study:

I declare that I have explained to the above named participant what participation in the study entails.

Researcher name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: ___ / ___ / ____, _____

Appendix B: Topic List

Introduction	○ Brief introduction to the research ○ Practical information (informed consent, audio recording, voluntary participation) ○ Brief introduction of the participant (role, field of work, experience)
General experiences	○ How do you define human trafficking within your work context? ○ Are you familiar with the different forms of human trafficking (e.g. sexual, criminal, or labour exploitation)? ○ Have you ever had suspicions of human trafficking in your work? If so, can you give an example?
Identification	○ What signs of human trafficking do you recognise in your daily practice? ○ How concerned are you about this? ○ What do you consider the most important indicators among your target group? ○ Which forms of exploitation do you encounter most often? ○ How well-prepared do you feel to recognise these signs? ○ What factors make it difficult to identify human trafficking? ○ Do you feel responsible for acting upon these signs?
Current knowledge & response practices	○ Are you familiar with the procedures within your organisation for discussing or reporting signs of trafficking? ○ To which external organisation(s) does your organisation report suspicions or signs of trafficking? ○ Suppose you suspect signs of human trafficking: what concrete steps would you take? Have you had experience with this? ○ Where do you obtain your knowledge on this topic? ○ What knowledge or response strategies do you feel are currently lacking? ○ Have you ever filed a report? If so, what was the process like? If not, what precented you from doing so? ○ What barriers do you face when taking action on suspected trafficking?
Support & training	○ Have you ever received training on identifying and responding to signs of human trafficking? ○ How helpful was this training in your work? ○ What do you feel is missing from current training and tools? ○ What kind of support would help you respond more effectively?
Work contexts	○ What specific challenges do you face in your work setting regarding the identification and handling of human trafficking? ○ How could collaboration between different professionals be improved? ○ What preventive measures do you consider effective in your field?
Possible solutions & recommendations	○ What would help you feel better prepared to recognise and respond to human trafficking? ○ What improvements would you like to see in training, guidelines, or collaboration? ○ How should this e-learning/ training be delivered or promoted to reach you effectively? ○ Do you have any suggestions for better tools or methods that could support professionals in this field?
Closing	○ Are there any other points we haven't discussed? ○ Thank you for your participation!

Appendix C: Code tree