

ABSTRACT

Becoming a Human Trafficker: Qualitatively Testing Social Learning Theory and Social Opportunity Structure among Bulgarian Human Traffickers

Sexual exploitation is a human rights violation sustained by sophisticated organized crime syndicates and a lucrative sex industry. In Europe, research on human traffickers indicates that people choose to become a trafficker due to the juxtaposition of widespread poverty and poor economic opportunity with reliable, well paid employment in the illegitimate economy. Building on this, the primary aim of this dissertation is to expand this existing, one-dimensional (economic) theoretical framework by examining the theorized cognitive and behavioral mechanisms represented by a leading criminology theory (social learning theory) and a more recent concept (social opportunity structure) developed from organized crime theory, as a means to broaden the understanding of why a person becomes a human trafficker. This will be achieved by qualitatively examining both theories from the perspective of Bulgarian human traffickers. A multiple-case study research design involving 16 interviews (participants) has yielded rich data from the perspective of an understudied, but crucial population. Findings can inform future community-based deterrence interventions and complement the current punitive approach, which collectively will bolster and diversify anti-trafficking prevention strategies.