



CONCEPTS

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PARAMEDICS IN IDENTIFYING CRIMINAL ACTIVITY: A CONCEPT PAPER

Steven Robertson, MHthSc¹

Author Affiliations: 1. PhD Candidate, Queensland University of Technology; Brisbane, Queensland, Australia .

*Corresponding Author: srobertson51@bigpond.com

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ABSTRACT

This concept paper covers the potential role of Australian paramedics in identifying and reporting various forms of crime such as organized crime (ACIC, 2017) and radicalization (Australia, 2015). Specifically, this paper will focus on the human trafficking element (Langhorn, 2018). This article discusses the knowledge gap of Australian paramedics and hypothesizes that, with improved awareness, human trafficking could be exposed.

Background - Paramedics, through their routine interactions with individuals, are observers of sexual health conditions (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Zimmerman et al., 2008) and the aftermath of violent assaults, and may witness indicators that could be crucial for law enforcement and crime prevention (Awerbuch et al., 2020; Wilson & Hill, 2021). The lack of adequate awareness among Australian paramedics in identifying the emerging crime of human trafficking is highlighted, along with the absence of robust reporting processes.

Design - This paper employed a scoping review using online databases, guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021) and the Joanna Briggs Institute methodology (Khalil et al., 2021). A total of 80 articles were identified, with 29 deemed relevant.

Results - The scoping review revealed a scarcity of Australian paramedicine research, particularly in the context of human trafficking awareness and reporting processes.

Conclusions - The scoping review emphasized the need for paramedic-specific training and education in identifying and reporting such crimes, drawing inspiration from awareness curriculums implemented in American emergency medical systems. The findings underscore the need for further research to enhance Australian paramedic awareness, contribute to operational guidelines, and develop targeted education programs. Cohort studies and organizational inquiries can establish the current understanding of Australian paramedics regarding human trafficking. This paper advocates for integrating human trafficking awareness into Australian paramedic training to empower them as potential contributors to crime identification and reporting.

INTRODUCTION

This article addresses the escalating global issue of human trafficking, a crime often concealed from public view (USFA, 2018) and on the increase in Australia (Langhorn, 2018). Considering the potential role of Australian paramedics in identifying such

crimes, a scoping review was conducted to systematically map existing research and identify gaps in Australian paramedic awareness of human trafficking. Through literature review and expert consultations such as Grant Edwards (AFP), the aim is to shed light on the level of awareness among Australian paramedics and explore the feasibility of incorporating human trafficking awareness into paramedicine training.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

This paper acknowledges the different forms of human trafficking, such as forced marriage, sexual exploitation, and forced labor, emphasizing the need for increased awareness among paramedics.

“Transnational Organized Crime, the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children” provides the following definition:

Trafficking in persons’ shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery, or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (UN, 2022)

CONCEPT DESCRIPTION

The primary objective of this concept paper is to evaluate the level of awareness among Australian paramedics regarding human trafficking and to explore existing awareness programs, training, and reporting procedures within Australian ambulance services. Emphasizing that paramedics are not meant to replace law enforcement but do have a responsibility to report criminal activity, the article advocates for improved awareness and user-friendly reporting systems.

METHOD

The study utilized the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) protocol (Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021). A data-charting form was developed to extract relevant variables from eligible studies, focusing on key study characteristics, first responder engagement, and contextual factors. 80 articles were initially identified. Duplicates were removed and with additional articles being excluded for various reasons including not being related to the cohort, unrelated interventions, or outcomes not related to the topic of research. The remaining 29 articles were deemed relevant for further analysis.

Research studies, grey literature, policy documents, and position statements from various organizations were included. The literature search encompassed databases including Embase, Medline, PubMed, Google Scholar, Science Direct, Scopus, and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) library.

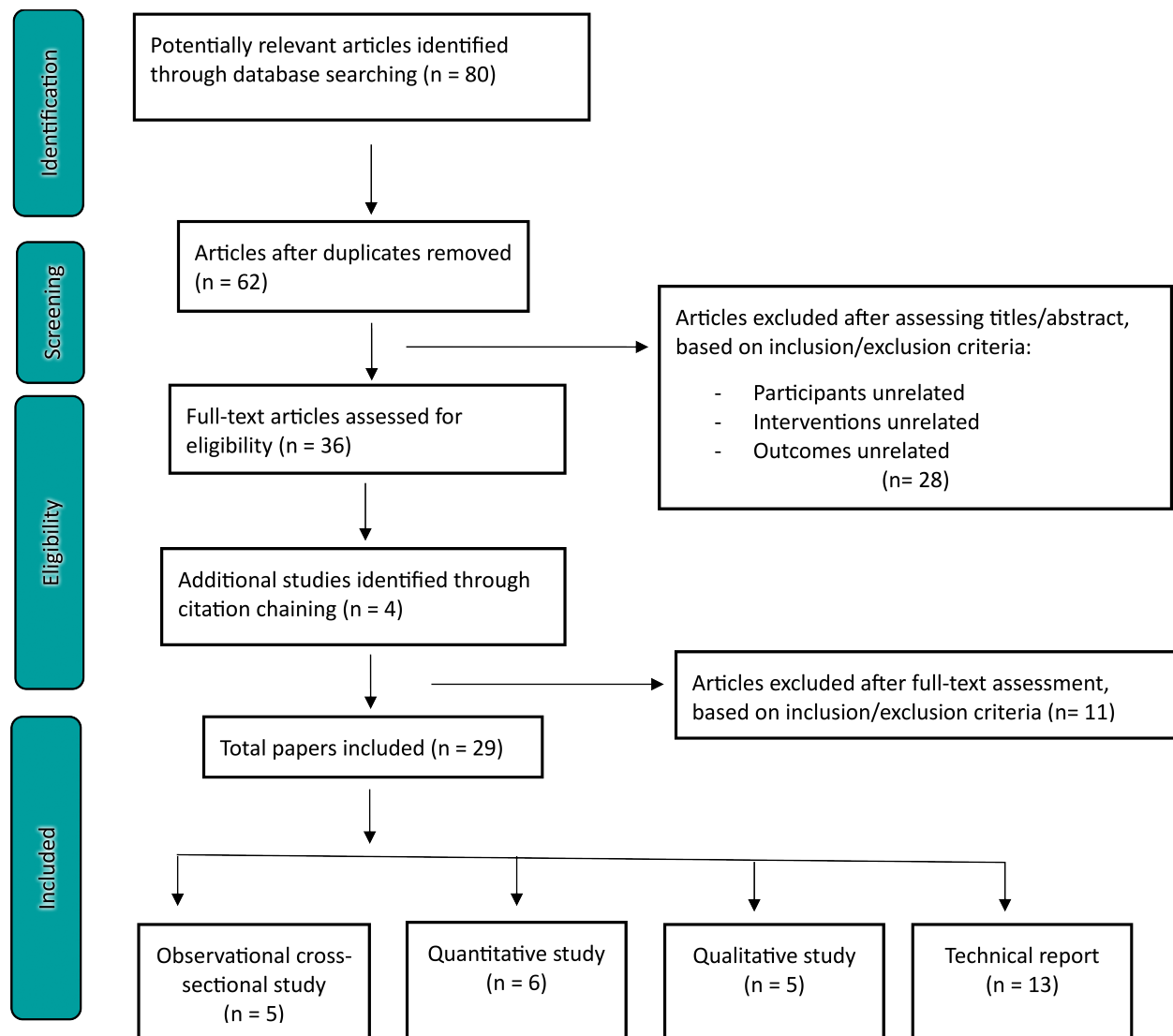


Figure 1. Modified PRISM flow diagram of article screening and selection (Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021).

RESULTS

The scoping review revealed a paucity of specific Australian paramedicine research on human trafficking awareness and reporting. Existing studies predominantly focused on American hospital-based medical practitioners, law enforcement agencies, and allied agencies (Awerbuch et al., 2020). There were several American EMS agencies delivering awareness program (USFA, 2018), contrary to the gap in Australian paramedic-centric research. American research has shown that less than half of the EMS professionals had human trafficking training (Donnelly et al., 2019).

DISCUSSION

Paramedics, as front-line responders, have the potential to be invaluable sentinels in identifying human trafficking. However, there are challenges facing paramedics in reporting crimes, particularly crimes against children, due to unclear procedures, fear of reprisal, and lack of awareness training. Research has found that Australian paramedics are “reasonably well educated and informed” (Sawyer et al., 2023) when it came to identifying child abuse and neglect but paramedics experienced barriers reporting this. Draw-

ing parallels with awareness programs on domestic family violence, this paper suggests that integrating human trafficking awareness into Australian paramedicine training may enhance their ability to identify red flags (Australia, 2015) in relation to human trafficking.

In the course of their daily duties, paramedics develop a unique professional intimacy with patients, prompting the consideration that they serve as exceptional guardians for the broader community. Lederer and Wetzel (2014) propose that paramedics, in their routine interactions, may encounter situations not readily exposed to law enforcement agencies. It is suggested that individuals, both patients and bystanders, may find themselves in a vulnerable state with lowered defenses in the presence of ambulance or paramedic responses.

Unlike practitioners based in hospitals, paramedics possess a distinctive exposure to the living and working conditions of their patients. Beyond extracting medical information, paramedics can discern potential indicators of human trafficking within the surrounding environment. This nuanced understanding, derived from the firsthand experiences, underscores the significance of paramedics as keen observers capable of identifying red flags associated with human trafficking. Consequently, the information gathered by paramedics holds the potential to raise suspicions and prove the value of their role in reporting such incidents.

In Australia, the reporting of various incidents, especially offenses against children, typically involves notifying a third party, such as hospital staff, ambulance supervisors, or the police (QAS, 2020). However, research evidence suggests that paramedics often face uncertainty in reporting crimes against children. Attributing to this challenge is a lack of clear procedures and awareness training in this specific domain (Brady, 2018). This paper posits that the complexity of reporting in the current prehospital environment arises from the demanding workloads and staffing pressures experienced by all stakeholders.

While ambulance services in Australia provide awareness training on prevalent social issues such as domestic family violence (DFV), discrimination, and inappropriate workplace behaviors, there is limited awareness training on the emerging issue of human trafficking. A review of existing literature reveals that some American emergency medical systems have implemented awareness curriculums addressing human trafficking (USFA, 2018). Despite undergoing awareness training, paramedics may not be fully confident in reporting current prevailing social issues, as suggested by Brady (2018) and Sawyer et al. (2023). Therefore, it is plausible to assume that paramedics may lack confidence in reporting incidents related to human trafficking.

The 2021 Working for Queensland survey indicates that 80% of Gold Coast (Australia, Queensland) paramedics feel confident in sensitively communicating with colleagues affected by DFV, and 79% are confident in effectively referring a colleague affected by DFV to appropriate support (State of Queensland, 2021). While these results suggest increased confidence in dealing with specific issues through targeted training, they also highlight the need for additional awareness training to empower paramedics in recognizing and reporting inappropriate actions. By delivering appropriate awareness training, there is a greater potential for paramedics to become vigilant observers, capable of identifying subtle red flags and confidently playing a proactive role in addressing human traffick-

ing (Falkiner et al., 2017; Sawyer et al., 2023). Some human trafficking signs may present like mental health issues such as unresponsiveness to questions, inappropriate anger, unusual loyalty to the traffickers, or the person not being able or allowed to speak for themselves. Physical signs may include intentional self-harming, malnutrition, evidence of violence or trauma, scarring, unusual tattoos that may indicate ownership, and the person not carrying or having access to their personal identification (USFA, 2018). Intense character changes or physical appearance could present as mental health deterioration to the paramedic, so the targeted and focused training may help distinguish between mental health deterioration and human trafficking.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Forced marriage, sexual and labor exploitation, and other coercive actions constitute elements of human trafficking (Lyneham, 2019). The Australian Federal Police (AFP) data indicates an increasing prevalence of forced marriage within the broader context of human trafficking from 2013 to 2021. Forced marriage was criminalized in Australia in 2013 (Simmons & Wong, 2021). This paper posits that identifying forced marriage is more intricate than recognizing sexual or labor exploitation, necessitating heightened awareness among Australian paramedics regarding this evolving issue and the impacts on its victims. Forced marriage is defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary (2023) as a marriage occurring without the agreement of one or both parties. Information or suspicion may manifest through patient conversations and behaviors, or behaviors of their relatives, often showing signs akin to domestic violence, including physical or sexual abuse, coercive control, and manipulation (Courts, 2022).

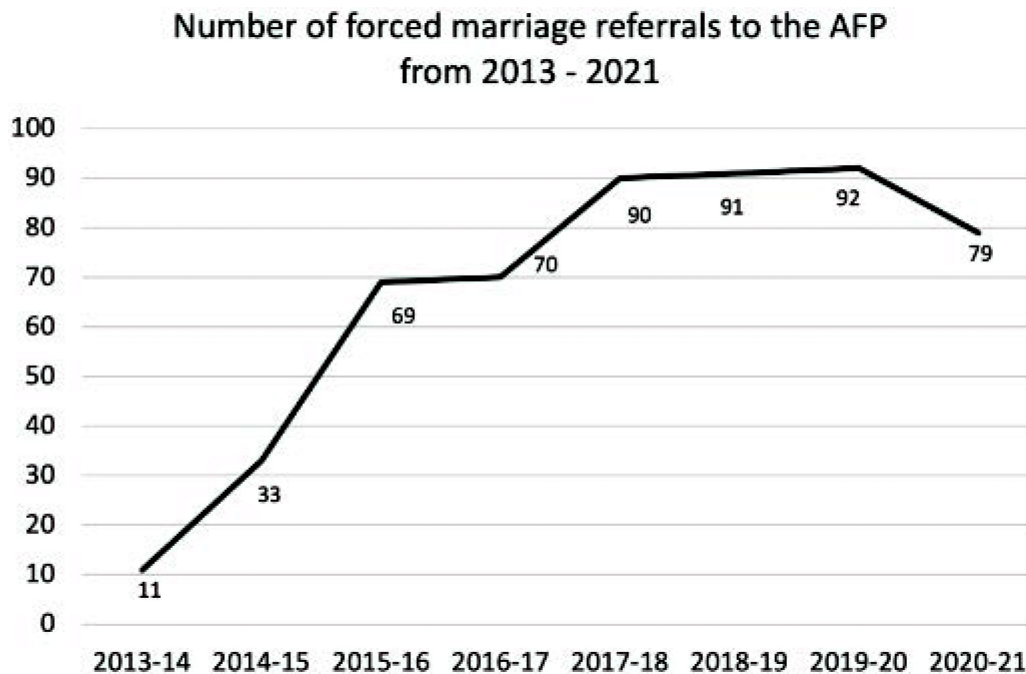


Figure 2. Forced marriages referred to Australia Federal Police (Simmons & Wong, 2021).

Human trafficking, especially in first-world countries, is prominently associated with the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation (Putt, 2007). The United Nations traffick-

ing citation index (UN, 2023) confirms this for Australia. Within Australia, these women originate from Thailand and, to a lesser extent, China, South Korea, and Malaysia. Disturbingly, children globally are also trafficked for sexual servitude, constituting approximately 25% of trafficked individuals (Whittington, 2022). Human trafficking has surpassed illegal arms sales worldwide, with projections indicating that persons trafficked for sexual servitude will soon outnumber those for trafficked drugs (Edwards, 2022).

Research suggests that criminal groups engaged in human trafficking in Australia are relatively small and discreet, occasionally posing as family units, making the crime challenging to identify during regular daily activities (Donnelly et al., 2019; Langhorn, 2018; USFA, 2018). Paramedic awareness training programs could utilize specific demographic information to create an increased suspicion index when encountering cases meeting these relevant parameters. Skills taught should include soft skills and techniques on how to communicate and ask gentle, nonjudgmental questions and how to evaluate and listen carefully so to understand if the victim's responses are in the context of possible human trafficking (USFA, 2018).

The seamless sharing of information between countries and agencies is deemed crucial to improving the prosecution of traffickers and protecting victims (Putt, 2007). Therefore, the system that information is passed on by paramedics to relevant authorities may play a pivotal role in prosecuting offenders and ensuring the safety of victims, underlining the importance of cohesive interagency interoperability (NPIA, 2009).

Despite the development of the "Look a little deeper" Human Trafficking awareness training package by the AFP, it remains unclear whether Australian Ambulance services have adopted this program. This package was offered to the Queensland ambulance service which refused to adopt the training as it was not a priority. The training package imparts information on the warning signs of human trafficking to first responders, relevant government organizations, state/territory police, universities, and non-government organizations (AFP, 2021).

Due to the increasing prevalence of forced marriage resulting from significant demographic changes, there is a need for further awareness within Australia (ACIC, 2017). Human trafficking is especially challenging to identify, and this article emphasises the need for paramedic awareness and training on the signs and impacts of forced marriage.

RISKS AND REPORTING SYSTEMS

Concern is raised about the moral obligation of reporting crimes, patient confidentiality, loss of trust in ambulance services, and personal risk to paramedics. This issue was raised in Canada when "Bill 46, the Gunshot and Stab Wounds Mandatory Disclosure Act" proposed mandatory reporting of gunshot and stab wounds (Simons, 2009).

This article does not advocate for paramedics to transition into the role of front-line law enforcement officers. However, as a recognised profession, Australian paramedics bear the responsibility to report criminal activities, and the ignorance of signs indicating illegal conduct is not a valid defense against non-reporting. Certain professions, including paramedicine in Australia, are mandated to report observations as part of their job responsibilities, with variations in reporting requirements across different jurisdictions (see below) (Falkiner et al., 2017).

Duty	Branch of Law	Duty-Bearer	Examples
Specific duty to report knowledge or belief about a child sexual offence	Criminal law	All adults	Ireland; South Africa; France; Victoria (Australia); New South Wales (Australia)
General duty to report serious criminal offences, implicitly including child sexual offences	Criminal law	All adults	USA
Duty to protect a child from the risk of sexual abuse by another person in a child and youth-serving organization	Criminal law	Managers or those in positions of authority in child and youth-serving organizations	New Zealand; Victoria (Australia); New South Wales (Australia)
Duty to report knowledge and reasonable suspicion or reasonable belief that a child has been or is being sexually abused (sometimes extending to risk of abuse)	Child protection law - "Mandatory reporting laws"	Members of designated professional groups, commonly including those in education, childcare, health, and law enforcement	Dozens of nations across developed and developing economies
Duty to report known and alleged cases of child sexual abuse within organizational settings to an independent external oversight body	Child protection law / Civil law / Reportable conduct schemes	Managers in child and youth-serving organizations	New South Wales; Victoria; Australian Capital Territory (Australia)
Duty to report where one knows or ought to know a child has been or is being sexually abused	Civil law - Torts - Negligence - Duty of care	A person in a professional relationship with a child of sufficiently close nature that the person owes the child a legal duty of care	USA; Canada; UK; Australia; New Zealand
Duty to report known and suspected cases of child sexual abuse	Occupational policy	Professional or practitioner in an occupation having such a policy	USA; Canada; UK; Australia; New Zealand

Table 1. Legal duties to report child sexual abuse (Falkiner et al., 2017).

Forced marriage is gender-based violence that leaves young girls and women vulnerable to a life of misery. Australian law looks at forced marriage as a form of family violence and a version of modern slavery (Simmons & Wong, 2021). As it can be summarized that paramedics’ core roles are to reduce pain, reduce suffering, and save lives, it may be possible to breach these roles by not reporting human trafficking. Laws that protect children and vulnerable people are generally well supported by communities. Research from India endorsed reporting by general practitioners on violations against children as a golden rule (Moirangthem et al., 2015).

The research acknowledges the risks associated with reporting crimes, as it may harm victims or the reporters. The potential backlash from dangerous criminals enforces the need for a highly secure and stringent anonymous reporting system, although the operational details of such a system falls beyond the scope of this paper, necessitating input from content experts in law enforcement. An anonymous, robust, user-friendly reporting system would instil confidence in paramedics to report illicit activities without fear of reprisal (Falkiner et al., 2017; Papp et al., 2019).

There are other professions such as teaching that have mandatory reporting requirements and are exposed to the public like paramedics. To safeguard these professionals, it is important that a reporting system has a robust responsive capacity as an integral part of this system (Falkiner et al., 2017).

LIMITATIONS

The scoping review is limited by primarily relying on publicly available information and excluding proprietary data. The results may not fully represent awareness programs

within Australian ambulance services. The study calls for more focused research, including formal interviews with current Australian paramedics.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper proposes that paramedics could contribute significantly to identifying and reporting human trafficking. (Awerbuch et al., 2020).

It is important to note that additional comprehensive research is necessary to validate the hypothesis presented. The proposition suggests that with appropriate awareness training (Awerbuch et al., 2020) and a user-friendly anonymous reporting system, paramedics could potentially contribute to identifying criminal activities, and help reduce suffering and address this heinous crime effectively.

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