Re-Conceptualizing Success: Investigating Specialized Units Responses to the Sexual Trafficking of Female Victim-Survivors

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Abstract
This paper explores police officers’ experiences working in a specialized human trafficking unit in Canada to identify challenges, strategies, and responses to working with victim-survivors. Analyzing data from semi-structured interviews, we find that officers deploy victim-centered responses reflecting procedural justice outcomes due to their awareness that the criminal justice process often re-victimizes. Officers’ deployment of procedural justice acknowledges the victim-survivor trauma, but also allows them to build a stronger case through evidence gathering, increasing the potential for charges and convictions, also known as distributive justice. We argue that this illustrates that these two approaches to justice are interdependent.

Keywords
sex trafficking, police response, procedural justice, distributive justice, victim-survivor trauma

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Introduction

Police responses to human trafficking cases impact not only the investigation process and the likelihood of justice, but also the recovery and experiences of victim-survivors\(^1\) (Farrell et al., 2019; Regehr et al., 2008). That said, traditional police responses center on convictions, characterized as distributive justice, which fails to take into account the trauma victim-survivors’ experience and the complex relationships they form with their abuser (Doychak & Raghavan, 2020; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Hoyle et al., 2011; Nichols & Heil, 2015). In contrast to distributive justice, procedural justice involves victim-survivor-centered responses to crime, accounting for their trauma, improving their experiences with the criminal justice system, and assisting with their recovery (Farrell, 2014; Jurek & King, 2020). However, despite the evidence indicating the important role that police officers can play in these cases, there remains a dearth of research that explicitly documents officers’ practices and strategies in responding to victim-survivors of sex trafficking (see Farrell et al., 2014).

Recent studies indicate that officers working in specialized trafficking units are likely to have a greater awareness of the complexity of these cases, which can positively impact their perceptions, understandings, and responses to victim-survivors (Ballucci & Drakes, 2020; Farrell et al., 2019; Jurek & King, 2020). Thus, to improve the responses of both patrol and specialized unit officers, it is essential to examine how police perceive, understand, and justify their responses to sex trafficking to enable the development of strategies and policies to better support and benefit victim-survivors.

As such, our paper specifically analyzes the responses of police officers working with victim-survivors of female sex trafficking through the analysis of semi-structured interviews from one specialized human trafficking unit in a Canadian jurisdiction. We find that, due to their awareness of the limitations of the criminal justice system in supporting victim-survivors of sex crimes, police deploy several strategies that support procedural justice practices. Specifically, officers discuss how the legal system does not account for victim-survivors’ trauma, nor the complex relationship between victim-survivors and offenders, which results in re-victimization. To address these shortcomings, police officers work to develop a rapport with the victim-survivors in order to deploy tailored and individualized responses. These include providing victim-survivors with the opportunity to choose if and how they want to participate in the criminal investigation, which can significantly improve the pathway to personal recovery.

This commitment to procedural justice, however, also serves distributive justice goals and increases police legitimacy (Posick & Policastro, 2013). In other words, although procedural and distributive justice differ in terms of their objectives, they are not mutually exclusive. For instance, a victim-centered response can positively impact the probability that an officer will be able to charge and/or convict a suspect. Further, providing support for victim-survivors of sex crimes increases the likelihood for cooperation, strengthening officer ability to identify victim-survivors, build a strong case, and press charges; each of which are distributive outcomes.
Overall, our findings show that officers understand success in sex trafficking cases differently and, as a result, create opportunities to engage in various practices for victim-survivors to achieve justice on their own terms. Furthermore, our analysis supports the extent to which procedural and distributive justice not only facilitate common goals (Ambrose & Arnaud, 2005; Flinder & Hauenstein, 1996; Van den Bos et al., 1998), but that this relationship is necessary in sex trafficking cases for any form of justice to occur.

The Challenges of Police Responses to Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is a complex phenomenon that has received significant international attention from academics, policymakers, and advocates (Ballucci & Drakes, 2020; Bjelland, 2017; Farrell et al., 2014; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Kempadoo et al., 2005). For instance, in 2002, Canada, in accordance with the United Nations, created domestic legislation that legally defined and criminalized human trafficking. Yet, interpreting and applying these laws has posed considerable challenges to law enforcement (Bjelland, 2017; Farrell et al., 2014, 2015; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Irwin, 2017; Karam, 2016). In particular, as a result of mixed attitudes and perceptions regarding who constitutes a victim-survivor, officials face the potential of failing to recognize and identify trafficking situations and, therefore, may be unable to help victim-survivors (Bjelland, 2017; Farrell, 2009; Jurek & King, 2020; Karam, 2016; Lam, 2018). Part of this problem arises as a result of police uncertainty in classifying individuals as victim-survivors, especially when these individuals themselves struggle to define their experiences as human trafficking (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Lam, 2018). In other words, due to the complex nature of victimology in these cases, victims, in the aftermath of trauma, may display a range of behaviors (Hopper, 2017) that make it challenging for officers lacking specialized training to properly identify their position (Bjelland, 2017; Farrell et al., 2014, 2015). As a consequence, police officers may rely on predetermined stereotypes regarding what should constitute “exploitation” which, in turn, impedes judgments of victimization.

To secure a charge or conviction, officers must rely heavily on the cooperation of victim-survivors (Gallagher & Holmes, 2008; RCMP, 2010; Ward & Fouladvand, 2018). This, however, creates additional challenges, as the role of victim-survivors as the primary source of evidence in human trafficking cases asserts their assistance as vital to an investigation’s success. This presents complex evidential issues (Ward & Fouladvand, 2018), as often many do not want to cooperate with police due to fear, trauma, and potential ‘love’ felt towards their trafficker (RCMP, 2010). In particular, victim-survivors often fear retaliation by their trafficker (RCMP, 2010), which may be elicited through threats of personal harm or harm to their friends or family (Baird & Connolly, 2021; Kennedy et al., 2007; Marcus et al., 2014; Ward & Fouladvand, 2018). This leads to unquestioned obedience, groomed over time by the abuser through a system of actions and consequences (RCMP, 2010). Additionally, victims may experience fear or shame about sharing their experience with law enforcement and, as a
result, may be unwilling to participate (RCMP, 2010), especially given the tendency for police to question their credibility, interrogate their sexual history, and attack their personal character during criminal proceedings (Randall, 2010; Ward & Fouladvand, 2018). Traffickers may also implicate victim-survivors in illegal activities as a method of keeping them from reporting or testifying, making them further unwilling to cooperate (Farrell et al., 2014; Ibrahim, 2018).

In other cases, some victim-survivors do not consider themselves victim-survivors (RCMP, 2010). Such a response is often characterized as ‘Stockholm Syndrome,’ in which the victim-survivors “develop positive feelings towards their abuser and negative feelings towards [the] authorities attempting to rescue them from a life of exploitation and victimization” (RCMP, 2010, p. 39). In the context of sex trafficking, this typically occurs in pimp-prostitute dynamics, where the victim-survivors believe they are in a romantic relationship with their abuser (Farrell et al., 2014; RCMP, 2010; Spencer et al., 2014). This is often referred to as a ‘Romeo Pimp’ situation, wherein a pimp uses romance and promises of a longer-term relationship as tools of manipulation to encourage sexual exploitation (Baird & Connolly, 2021; Kennedy et al., 2007; Spencer et al., 2014). The result is a deep psychological manipulation that prevents victim-survivors from being able to identify their experience as victimization due to perceptions of an emotional bond, making them unable or unwilling to cooperate in the investigation and prosecution process. In all human trafficking situations, however, victim-survivors are socially excluded, vulnerable, and in need of significant support (Ward & Fouladvand, 2018). Thus, despite the trauma they have endured and the associated complex evidential issues of their testaments, their participation is critical to the success of an investigation (Ward & Fouladvand, 2018). The importance of this participation thereby creates additional obstacles and responsibilities for police agents, who must provide not only safety, but also support for victim-survivors (Macy & Graham, 2012).

**Procedural and Distributive Justice: Policing Approaches**

Increasingly, policing integrates elements from procedural and distributive concepts of justice (Lind, 2001; Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Walker et al., 1979). In particular, studies show a change in favor of a victim-centered model that delineates law enforcement as one of many components, rather than the only component, required to resolve sex crimes and aid victim-survivors (Clark, 2003, p. 314). From this perspective, police serve as ‘gatekeepers,’ assisting victim-survivors with essential services to support the recovery process (Wilson et al., 2001). This approach requires that officers engage in practices that move beyond the traditional confines of investigation (Clark, 2003) to instead focus on procedural aspects that revolve around providing individual support which, in turn, becomes a critical philosophical tactic to reduce the effects of criminal victimization (Clark, 2003).

Importantly, procedural justice determinants are predominately based on the relationship that is built between legal authorities and victim-survivors, as well as the
perceived fairness through which criminal justice officials make decisions to positively influence individual satisfaction with legal agents, such as police. Thus, in many ways, procedural justice is contrary to traditional police organizational structures and goals, wherein performance appraisal, which prioritize and reward officers for charges and convictions, plays a key role (Clark, 2003, pp. 319–320). That is, police are trained to obtain evidence and build strong cases, as reflected in distributive goals that are concerned with outcomes, which are commonly measured in terms of charges and convictions. While distinct, a clear relationship exists between these objectives, wherein distributive justice is more likely to occur if procedural justice is present.

Overall, although distributive and procedural justice are considered to be independent approaches, research has long supported a strong correlation between the two (McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992; Walker et al., 1979). In 1979, for example, Walker, Lind, and Thibaut suggested that these forms of justice should not be seen in juxtaposition, but rather as a cohesive way to evaluate individual beliefs and controlled procedures. While both procedural and distributive justice are concerned with the fairness of decisions and outcomes (Conlon, 1993; Greenberg, 1990; Leventhal, 1980), these goals are processed in different ways. Traditional research on organizational justice, however, distinguishes between procedural and distributive justice as distinct constructs (Folger, 1986), but recent studies suggest that these constructs overlap (Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2001; Hauenstein et al., 2001). That is, individuals can make inferences about procedural justice from information provided by distributive justice (Lind & Lissak, 1985), and, in return, can make inferences about distributive justice from procedural justice perspectives (Van den Bos et al., 1998). Distributive and procedural fairness are, therefore, interdependent, rather than conceptually distinct. Not only do these concepts share meaningful and fundamental commonalities, but they also have similar variations in outcomes that cannot be ignored. Thus, by its very nature, looking at the contribution of one form of justice—that is, treating it independently from the other—misjudges its relationship (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2001; Hauenstein et al., 2001). To better understand how best to respond to and support victim-survivors of human trafficking, agencies must instead consider new measures of policing performance, as statistics examining the effects of prosecutorial modes of crime control alone do not equate to successful policing practices (Bjelland, 2017; Clark, 2003; Innes & Sheptycki, 2004).

As we will show in the following sections, efforts to place the experiences of victim-survivors at the forefront of policing practices illustrate how police perceive victim-survivors’ satisfaction with the criminal justice process and how doing so facilitates convictions by providing much-needed involvement from the survivors themselves. Moreover, police officers’ knowledge and awareness of the limitations of the criminal justice system informs their responses and supports their initiatives to focus on the needs of the individuals affected. Our findings suggest the necessity of specialized investigation units, which have important connections not only within the organization, but also the community, which affords them the ability to offer victim-survivors the
Methodology

The analysis portion of this paper pulls data from one-on-one, in-person interviews with police officers working in a specialized human trafficking unit in a metropolitan Canadian jurisdiction. The study was authorized by the Western Research Ethics Board and was supported by an internal University grant. To conduct the interviews, the first author received approval to conduct this study from the unit supervisor and the police agency’s research office. Once approval was attained, the first author scheduled an in-person meeting with the supervisor who, shortly thereafter, invited the members of the specialized unit to participate. The members were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, and that their responses would not be shared with their superiors or affect their positions in any way. There was no incentive offered for participating. This information was also detailed in the consent form that each participant signed. In consultation with the supervisor, we scheduled a series of days to conduct the interviews at the headquarters.

In total, 13 members within this unit were interviewed ranging in rank, from detective to superintendent. The members consisted of eight males and five females. The majority of individuals in the unit had over 15 years of experience prior to entering, and at least 2 years of prior experience in various investigative units, such as Sex Crimes, Guns & Gangs, and Domestic Violence. According to the unit’s mandate, human trafficking investigations focus on recognizing the sensitive needs of victims and engaging in proactive and reactive measures. To assist with this goal, each member completes training, which includes, for example, education on investigations processes, collecting evidence for criminal prosecutions, and providing victim-survivor support. Lastly, a highly experienced officer also informed us that, informally, members considered for this unit are chosen carefully; specifically, he states that it is essential to ensure that those in the unit understand sexual exploitation.

The interview questions were semi-structured, with the aim of understanding the strategies, processes, and responses used by police officers in their investigation of sex trafficking cases. The interviewees were asked a series of broad, open-ended questions that inquired about general mandates and policies. The responses to these questions shaped more specific questions about each interviewee’s roles, responsibilities, and practices. The interviews spanned 60–90 minutes in length, were audio-recorded with accompanying handwritten notes regarding emerging themes and areas of interest and, finally, were professionally transcribed and digitized. Any indicators that could trace a potential employee to the police jurisdiction were eliminated from the paper. Importantly, we did not foresee or experience any potential risks or harms to the interviewees. Using NVIVO 12 software to code and analyze the data pulled from this process, we were able to develop a series of emerging themes, which broadly ranged from definitions of trafficking, responses, and practices, and roles of police agents,
while offering multiple perspectives by analyzing individuals within and across cases (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For the purposes of this paper, the themes included are the limitations of the criminal justice system (reliance on victim-survivors), revictimization, and police responses, which was sub-coded into victim-survivor-centered strategies and case outcomes.

**Police Awareness and the Complexity of Victimization**

The criminal justice system requires particular forms of evidence to exercise justice, which creates significant limitations and challenges for police detectives throughout the investigation and prosecution of human trafficking cases. As summarized by one officer, “there [are] two things that are challenging. One is disclosure, the other is victim-management” (Interview G). In both, the overarching commonality is an overreliance on victim-survivors’ testimony as the basis of the case. For instance, a common sentiment across interviews is that “without a victim […] without a victim’s statement, without a willingness, you have no case” (Interview G). Thus, the victim-survivors are often the primary witnesses in human trafficking cases, requiring their cooperation for any potential conviction. As such, officers describe their responsibilities as including the management of victim-survivors, which involves providing individual support to keep them committed to prosecuting their abuser. In doing so, officers are better able to attain digital evidence to corroborate stories and identify other potential witnesses (Interview G). By corroborating the evidence in this way, the officer is able to go wherever the information takes them (Interview D) to put together a more compelling case and, ultimately, successfully lay charges.

The importance of victim-survivors’ participation is further encapsulated in a quotation by one officer, who describes the harsh reality of these cases: “without having a disclosure from a victim, you don’t have a case. You don’t have charges” (Interview A). However, given the complexity of trafficking trauma, corroborating evidence based on a victim-survivor’s memory poses challenges. For instance, officers often noted that one ultimate motive of the trafficker is to confuse their victim-survivors through frequent location changes and forced drug consumption, which inhibits their ability to decipher time passing (Interview B). The transient nature of the crime, alongside the substance dependencies, thereby impacts the victim-survivors’ ability to recall details, which can diminish the validity of their testimony.

If you’re a victim of crime and [I ask …] “where did this happen?” [and you respond with] “I don’t know,” it’s hard. Can you narrow it down to a city? I think it was [city removed], I’m not sure. It was dark. We were constantly traveling. We traveled at night. I was constantly high. I remember seeing maybe a [name of hotel removed]. Okay, well, now there’s something. So, now we have to track it down. We have to try and [check] booking records […] for the accused name. Oftentimes, they’ll use fake names. They’ll pay with cash. So, it makes it difficult to corroborate what the victim is telling us, and, in the justice system, everything is about corroboration. As investigators, our job is to listen to a story
and then gather evidence to support the information that has been provided to us. (Interview B)

In this way, the inability to accurately recall events elicits many challenges and can ultimately jeopardize the strength of the case, as detectives rely on these statements not only to corroborate evidence to prove the charges under human trafficking laws, but also for credibility. Nonetheless, victim-survivors’ statements are sought after and considered essential to build a case.

Well, for me, it’s about corroboration, right? That was important to us, because typically what happened before was that Jane Smith would come to me and give me a story about what happened to her, and we would take it at full disclosure and they would send it to the court, and then we would expect this poor, young girl to recount, in accurate detail, all these horrific things that happened to her two or three years ago, [...] if not longer. People are suffering from mental health [and …] drug addiction. I don’t even remember what happened a year ago, and I’m a professional witness. So, imagine somebody who is not. That [is …] a really high expectation from somebody who really didn’t have it together for lack of better terms. So, what could we do to ease that burden? What I would say is that whenever they gave us information, we corroborated it. (Interview H)

By engaging in these various victim-centered strategies and practices, officers ease the burden of the victim-survivors. In this way, police responses involving listening to victim-survivors experiences not only reflect a form of procedural justice, but also increases the likelihood of cooperation with the police and, therefore, the potential for distributive justice outcomes, such as prosecution.

Nevertheless, initial cooperation does not guarantee long-term cooperation. In some instances, the process can span anywhere from two to 4 years, as the case must go through the initial statement, evidence collection, and trial phases before conviction occurs (Interview G). One officer expands on this, stating that it is not always the case where the initial meeting with a victim-survivor results in their presence for the remainder of the inquiry process which, in turn, can prove incredibly challenging (Interview C). Part of this comes from fear of judgement and accusations of falsehood, as well as the potential to see their accused, which keeps them from pursuing the case further (Interview C). Thus, a major component of the officer’s role is victim-management. Here, the goal is to maintain contact as a means of a “hard balance” (Interview E), wherein the overall well-being of the victim-survivor is of utmost importance while arresting and prosecuting an offender. This is especially crucial, as officers often acknowledge that the criminal justice process can be re-traumatizing for victim-survivors, who are expected to commit to several years of rehashing old wounds. This can be particularly difficult when attempting to balance the desire to catch an offender and the more “human element” of what these processes do to the impacted individual (Interview E). In this way, officers begin to experience discomfort with an
overreliance on victim-survivors, as this can take an emotional and mental toll on their overall well-being.

Further, another factor to consider when attempting to understand why victim-survivors may choose not to engage with the criminal justice system is the victim-offender dynamic. This offers a complicated insight into the relationship that can sometimes form between the victim-survivor and their trafficker, often referred as either a “Romeo-” or “Gorilla-Pimp.” One officer explains:

For one case, you would have the Romeo-type pimp, where there was a period of manipulation or romancing […] Where the pimp was trying to bring in the victim-survivor and show her the life, and give her the boyfriend or the male figure in her life that she could rely on, and who is [going to] [sic] provide for her […] before moving into] exploiting her and trafficking her. And then you have cases where it’s just pretty much threatened violence. Two cases I can think of where the trafficker or traffickers have gone into a situation, identified what girls or girl that they want, and through force and threats essentially take those girls and force them to do it. (Interview E)

Both ends of the dynamic pose considerable challenges for investigators, as each bares individualized reasons for a victim-survivor to wish not to participate in the criminal justice process and testify against their abuser. In the Gorilla-pimp dynamic, they fear retaliation by their abuser and believe cooperating with the police can create significant safety concerns. Conversely, in the Romeo-pimp dynamic, they consider themselves romantically involved with their offender and do not want to testify against their alleged partner. This, in turn, creates substantial drawbacks in maintaining the participation of victim-survivors in these cases.

It’s no different than somebody who’s involved in a romantic relationship, and they have an argument. We all have arguments with significant others and then you have somebody coming in and saying, okay, listen, we’re [going to] [sic] take you out of this. You’re like wait a minute, no, no, no, hold on a second. This is all good. This is just a little bit of a blip. We’re upset but everything is [going to] [sic] work itself out. So, they fail to recognize that they’ve been exploited and so that’s what makes it difficult. Generally, what happens when a young woman in an exploited relationship comes forward is when […] one of two things happens, they find out that […] this guy’s been seeing somebody else […] the whole time, […] so now they’re angry and they come forward or there’s a significant amount of violence that is used and then they’ll come forward […] But generally, there’s that relapse, that once they’ve come forward, now they’re like oh my god, what did I do? Did I do the right thing? And so now it becomes more difficult for us to keep them on board. (Interview B)

Often, these circumstances lead victim-survivors to deny their experience as exploitation. Instead, they see their abuse as standard conflicts or arguments with their romantic partner, thereby turning these investigations into domestic situations
In these cases, victim-survivors may feel deeply connected with their abuser, which they internalize as a form of love and commitment within their perceived relationship (Interview A). Similar to what is witnessed in intimate partner violence (IPV), this perception of ‘love’ can be understood as a trauma-bond.

There’s [these] psychological chains, for lack of a better term, that prevent these women from leaving... Let’s take away the sex trafficking [sic] and you put a woman in an abusive relationship [...] We’ve heard of the battered women’s syndrome, where they just finally react, but you look at long standing domestic abuse relationships, people are like well, why didn’t you just leave? Because [sic] he was my support system. I didn’t know how to survive on my own. I didn’t know what to do. Where I mean he would beat her viciously, slammed her head against a car door and I mean just in between the car frame and even then, she had called [the] police and [...] a witness had seen this and when the police came to take a statement, she’s like no, never happened. But she struggled and there was that little bit of her in there that kept saying this isn’t right [...] but there was a bigger part that kept saying you love him [...] and she recognized that and she said to me, “There’s something wrong with me for me to think like this and I see that now but I can’t help but feel like that. (Interview B)

In these situations, learning about the trafficker’s ‘relationships’ with other victim-survivors may encourage the initial desire to participate with police; however, the following feelings of regret, guilt, and betrayal often make sustained cooperation a challenge. Even in cases where the victim-survivor recognizes the abusive behavior as unacceptable after initially denying it, the impact of the trauma-bond can be so powerful that the victim maintains loyalty to their abuser. In turn, these victim-survivors avoid the police, regardless of being aware of the harm that is being done to them.

We have the victim’s aspect of it where it’s very challenging. Sometimes it’s [similar to] [sic] domestic because they’re in a relationship with this person that they still have feelings [for them]. It can be up and down, one minute they hate the person, one minute they want nothing to do with you. You just have to be supportive and understand what they’re going through. (Interview C)

This concept of psychological trauma preventing victim-survivors from recognizing their abuse echoes across interviews and is a heavy burden for these individuals to overcome when deciding to leave their perpetrators (Interview G). Thus, it becomes increasingly important to understand the complicated victim-offender relationship when attempting to explain why relying on victim-survivors’ testimony is a primary concern for police detectives investigating sex trafficking cases. Ultimately, although essential for the investigation, many victim-survivors have deep-rooted trauma-bonds and psychological reasoning as to why they may not want to cooperate with officers. Additionally, victim-survivors may initially come forward only to withdraw their
involvement from the criminal proceedings, which means the case cannot move forward. In other words, distributive justice is no longer a viable outcome.

**Procedural Justice: Victim-Centered Strategies**

Reflecting aspects of procedural justice, officers will engage in acts to build rapport and empower victim-survivors, which also works to support the investigation process. In other words, to keep victim-survivors involved and willing, officers express a fundamental need to build rapport and use transparent communication and compassion to investigate female sex trafficking cases effectively. These acts are the fundamental foundation for a positive and trusting relationship between victim-survivors and officers, which is based on a mutual understanding from a “trauma-informed basis” (Interview G). Here, officers offer victim-survivors a ‘sensitive,’ bonded support system (Interview C), which creates a space in which the individual feels comfortable and supported when disclosing information and participating in the investigation. Thus, victim-management and the creation of bonds become key throughout criminal proceedings to strengthen the case.

For this reason, we can see clear comparisons between responses to human sex trafficking cases and other crimes, wherein the development and fostering of bonds with victim-survivors acts as the most fundamental determinant of the success of the case. Without trust, officers run the risk of losing vital participation, thereby harming their chances of conviction. Thus, building rapport is crucial, as victim-survivors are often fearful or distrustful of the criminal justice process and must feel in control of their participation. This process takes time, however, as one officer explains:

As [sic] soon as we meet the victim-survivors, we have to be able to get them to trust us. We have to be transparent, let them know exactly what to expect. We don’t force them. Sometimes it is a process. We have to get them to gain our trust. They may not want to talk to us right then and there, but we let them know that we are available. We explain what human trafficking is. We explain some of their safety risks as well [...] if they ever feel that they’re in a situation that they can’t handle, we let them know that they can always contact us as well. (Interview C)

Thus, throughout this process, safety is of utmost concern in terms of the victim-survivors’ physical and mental well-being. Officers, therefore, maintain clear communication and transparency about the expectations of the criminal process and the potential risks to not only allow victim-survivors to make informed decisions concerning their participation, but also to facilitate trust.

Further, expressions of compassion facilitate the forward movement of the process, as victim-survivors who may feel shame or stigma are afforded opportunities for their experiences to be acknowledged in a non-judgmental environment. In this way, officers build rapport and demonstrate compassion by understanding the complex trauma and life circumstances that may have resulted in the initial victimization:
I think we can’t forget the one very basic word, and that’s compassion. That we’re human beings. Because a victim can be anybody, it could be your sister, it could be your niece, it could be my daughter, it could be absolutely anybody. So, we start out with that. We always show respect, we never ever use derogatory terms, ever. We’re informed about what human trafficking is, we’re informed about the law, we’re informed to be compassionate, and that comes from experience because [sic] you see what happens to a person that could very well be a victim-survivor of circumstance. (Interview G)

This approach treats victim-survivors as more than merely articles of evidence. When detectives humanize the victim-survivor and speak to them with respect, the likelihood of fostering a better relationship improves dramatically. Moreover, by educating themselves on the significant trauma within these relationships and the circumstances of abuse, officers are better able to see these individuals as people whose lives seek to be preserved and protected.

Another component of gaining the trust of victim-survivors revolves around flexibility and leeway in terms of how processes such as interviews and testimonies unfold (Interview A). However, officers must also be cautious of phrasing and how interactions occur to maintain legitimacy and lower the risks of the victim-survivor unravelling due to perceptions of mistrust or dishonesty (Interview A). The primary concern here is building rapport, and officers will do whatever is necessary to prove to the victim-survivor that they equate to more than evidence. For instance, although the nature of policing requires interviewing and recorded statements, the officer focuses on ensuring that victim-survivors are comfortable and feel empowered by adhering to their requests, whatever they may be. Such practices impact the overall willingness to cooperate and demonstrate the importance of communicating transparently, thus moving beyond the confines of traditional police responsibilities:

It’s not just being a police officer. It’s a little bit of everything; a social worker, sometimes a mother, sometimes just a friend. It’s a little bit of everything, which is different from most positions on the service. This is definitely ... it could be challenging because you see what they’re going through, some of their pain, and sometimes we’re the only person that they have to talk to. That’s why I’ll give them my cell phone number and let them know I’m here. (Interview C)

The affordance of continuous access and support seen in these specialized units, however, is a practice not common in policing. Rather, the officers in this unit, in responding to sex trafficking, must meet both the immediate and long-term needs of victim-survivors, which results in various types of supports being necessary throughout all stages of the criminal process. For instance:

The important thing is even […] before we even get to statement taking, is that basic needs are met. There’re all sorts of things you have to [sic] make sure if somebody’s giving a willing statement that they’re physically able to give a statement, have they been fed? I
won’t take a statement from somebody who hasn’t been fed, and who is too tired, who’s been up all night, who’s drunk. There might be medical attention that’s needed, you might have to have a sexual assault kit [sic] [...] All of these things are absolutely, incredibly important to have a plan. So, we have to have a plan and we talk about that upfront, because these are all worrisome things. Health, food, what’s going to [sic] happen next, like are we going to the dedicated shelter, is there a family member? What are we doing next? [We can’t just say] "OK, we’re going to [sic] take a statement, see you later." Never ever, ever, ever. It’s always we drive them to where ever they’re going [sic], we have our associates that come in house who we call [...] for a follow up and the] very next day [...] we have to get her a place [to feel safe] [sic]. (Interview G)

Thus, despite the immediate need to attain a statement, the investigator prioritizes the safety of the victim-survivor and assures that they have access to basic needs, thereby creating an environment of comfort and support.

Yet, this is only one step of many. A critical component of managing victim-survivors depends on the officer’s ability to pair these individuals with the appropriate community resources while engaging in strategic planning to support their overall recovery and well-being. One officer explains:

If it’s a victim-survivor who, the big thing is trying to reestablish their life, it would be us getting in contact with whatever support systems we’ve introduced them to, to ensure that what our victim-survivor’s telling us is being relayed to the support services. Just to make sure that all the dots are connecting. So, if she wants to go to school, to make sure that whoever is supporting her is aware that that’s one of her goals, or that’s important to her. Or reconnecting with her family is important to her. So, it would be a lot of liaising with other agencies to ensure that, because [sic] we can’t offer those types of supports ourselves. Just to make sure [...] and to be true to the victim-survivors. If I tell her, "I’m going to get you to a place of safety," make sure that I have a place of safety that I’m going to [sic] get her to that night, and I’m not going to [sic] drop her to a hotel room by herself. Right? Which we don’t do, but just being true to them, I think. (Interview E)

In this way, providing victim-survivors with the resources necessary to aid in both the healing process and reintegration into society is a primary focus of the victim-centered approach. Thus, to support the victim-survivors and, inadvertently, the investigation process across both the short- and long-term, police officers set up access to services offered through their community partnerships to provide need-specific supports (i.e., counselling to address trauma and harm). To achieve this, officers must “tailor decisions about support programs to [the] needs” of the individual victim-survivor at hand, wherein they must first do an analysis at the human-level and then decide what services will provide the best results based on who they are and what they need (Interview H). This becomes a critical aspect of victim-management, as one officer explains:
Well, we work with outside organizations as well, like [Community Partnership]. Some of these girls, they don’t have anywhere to go. [Community Partnership], they have a bed for human trafficking victim-survivors. We deal with them. We also deal with [Community Partnership] where they provide counseling, not only for the young lady or male, but also for their family as well. They provide a support system, and they help us throughout the whole court system. Some of these victim-survivors, they don’t have any ID. They don’t have any property, because everything’s taken away. They actually assist us and provide whatever it is that these victim-survivors need, as well as victim-survivors services, they assist as well. (Interview C)

Another officer further expands on this:

[…] our management of that person can take three years. I think that’s something that is because we’re a dedicated unit, we’re dedicated to our victim-survivors. Every member of my team is like that, so we don’t just like, "Yeah, see you in court in three years." No. There are ongoing collaborations, so wherever that system is, we try to combat it with our victim-management, with our collaboration with the Crown, with the NGO’s, non-government officials, with all of the support systems. (Interview G)

Overall, police officers deploy several victim-centered strategies, such as the development of rapport and provisions of essential support systems to assure the victim-survivors that their overarching goal is to assist, rather than use them. Nonetheless, victim-centered strategies are the actionable efforts of police to increase the likelihood of procedural justice outcomes for victim-survivors that facilitate a greater likelihood of distributive justice.

**Avenues for Success: Facilitating the Old with the New**

In order to fully assess the success of a case, one must consider whether or not victim-survivors are able to regain a sense of control within their lives. In some instances, there is an immediate acknowledgement of their loss of power, thereby allowing them to seek the help they need to heal. Whereas for others, such as those engaged in Romeo-pimp dynamics, there is a missing awareness for the true extent of their exploitation and loss of control, which prevents them from taking steps forward. As a result, officers consider investigations to be successful when victim-survivors finally acknowledge the victimization and trauma they have endured.

[Success …] That would be two pronged [sic]. So, [the] outcome where the victim-survivor has a chance, and some victim-survivors need that chance, to confront their trafficker. They’ve come to terms with everything and, in order for them to move on, they have to confront them. So, seeing the strength of some of these girls through court process is incredible. So, for me, watching them get to that and them being successful and saying what they need to. Not even looking at whether the trafficker is going to jail or gets
convicted, just letting them go through the process that they may need to go through. That’s a huge accomplishment for me and a success because then that girl has had her opportunity. Right? She’s finally given the power and whatever it is she needs. And if that’s going to [sic] help her move on, then that’s huge. And then you have the prosecution side, where seeing these guys go to jail and face the jail sentences. They’re getting good sentences, right? And stopping them from exploiting girls, even if it’s for that period of time they’re in jail. At least that’s four years they’re not exploiting somebody. (Interview E)

Thus, victim-survivors are empowered through the opportunity to confront their trafficker and acknowledge that what was done to them was unacceptable. In this way, the measure of success is less about the ultimate conviction, but the ability of the victim-survivor to face their abuser and become a survivor (Interview G).

Not only this, but the shift in language from ‘victim’ to ‘survivor,’ and to a combination of the terms, serves as a way for victim-survivors to further regain control over their identity and heal, as they acknowledge that what they once were does not define who they can be.

Going out of this bad situation that they were in, however we measure that, that is absolutely a measure of success, because the whole idea, I mean there’s a campaign even now about however you want to proceed, whatever avenues, these are all up to you. Whatever avenue a victim-survivor of a sexual assault, whatever avenue a person wants to take, the resources are out there, so we have to measure that as a success as well, if somebody is back with their family, and they’re maybe going back to school. Maybe they’ve recovered because it’s a big healing process for recovered, that is a measure of success, absolutely. (Interview G)

Thus, in regaining control over their lives, victim-survivors achieve autonomy in deciding if and how to engage with the criminal justice system. Even in situations where the abuse is not immediately recognized, they begin to feel empowered when the harm is acknowledged with the aid of these victim-centered strategies, thereby improving their overall knowledge and making them better equipped to advocate for themselves. The following describes a particularly stand out success story:

So, one, a very, very challenging case, a very bad guy who exploited a woman, and she was in love with him, it was actually presented almost like a domestic case at the very beginning. It was very difficult because she had provided an amazing statement with a lot of information and when I say amazing, I mean it was just that it incorporated so much of the actual bread and butter elements of human trafficking in that she was exploited, there was a child involved, there were many aspects of it. And really maybe two days after she had provided her statement, she had regretted it. But this was a really bad guy, and we already arrested him. She really didn’t want to go through with it right up until the preliminary hearing where she felt bad for him, she was remorseful, she was regretful, she was still in
love with him. Then she changed her mind, and she provided testimony to the court and
she realized that what he was doing was manipulating her, he was coercing her, he had
trafficked her, he assaulted her, he beat her up while she was lying on the ground with her
baby and when she was trying to leave, he’d taken all of her money and taken her baby […]
every single penny that she made, that he forced her to work and that she made was turned
over to him. Really stripped her, stripped her of her dignity. And when it came time we got
a conviction, and she went up on the stand and gave a victim-survivor impact statement
right to the judge basically, and she looked him right in the eye, because [sic] a victim-
survivor impact statement doesn’t have to be read by the victim-survivor, it could be read
by the Crown, could be just given to the judge. So, she looked at him right in the eye and
she named him, and she told him that he had ruined her life and that she couldn’t trust
anybody anymore, and that she didn’t know what the future held for herself as far as other
relationships went. And she said, "But for you, after you do your time, I hope you meet a
nice girl, and I hope that you have a family." And then, "I hope that you have a daughter
and that this never happens to her." And she, at the end of this, it was chilling. It was
chilling for her, because [sic] she was so well spoken and amazing, like I mean it’s not the
first time I will tell you that I’m amazed by these women and young girls. She said all that
and when she got off the stand and we talked afterwards, she felt like a million bucks. That
was a measure of success. And he was convicted and that’s fine too. (Interview G)

Overall, what we gain here is an understanding of the complexity of female sex
trafficking victimization, the challenges police endure in sustaining cooperation in
domestic presenting cases, and the significant ways success can be conceptualized
beyond convictions in these cases.

Moreover, another important victim-centered measure of success is when victim-
survivors are able to reintegrate into society. This process has several components, all
tailored around the victim-survivor’s ability to live a ‘normal’ life. One officer explains:

Well, I don’t determine success by prosecution, so I think that’s important right off the bat.
Our success isn’t gauged on a conviction or not. For me, that’s not how I gauge it. I would
gauge it on how their sentiment is about the experience of working with us, and how it’s
related to their overall, down the road success in life. And although that is such a grandiose
word, I think their success for them, could be that they’re sober for a year, or even if it’s
short term, they’re sober for a month, and then it’s a year. And then, whether they got a job,
whether it’s working at McDonalds, or whether they become some huge executive
somewhere. For me, it’s them not being in the sex trade at the least. I’m accepting of the
fact that with the peaks and valleys, there’s going to [sic] be times when they relapse and
they go back into the sex trade, but at least that’s … If it’s mitigated by the fact that they’re
working for themselves and are not working for others, that is a small success for me.
That’s how I measure the success. (Interview H)
Here, success is related to not only their sentiment and experience working with law enforcement, but also the way that this assists with their reintegration later in life. Comparatively, another officer expresses success as such:

Interviewee: “I would definitely say a lot of my cases were successful because a lot of them, they’ve changed, in a good way. I’ve had one girl, where she went to university after. She’s writing a book. She wants to help other victim-survivors. That’s where I think it’s, for me, the best part of my job. Where I get to help someone, rescue them, and then see the results, where it’s a positive one.”

Interviewer: “A success then, for you, is not only convictions […] how would you characterize this other type of successful case?”

Interviewee: “Definitely for me, the success would be rescuing the victim-survivors\(^4\) and actually seeing their life turn around in a positive way.” (Interview C)

In this way, officers seek and gain satisfaction from enabling victim-survivors to remove themselves from the exploitation of trafficking by providing them with the services and supports necessary to improve the quality of and control over their lives, which ultimately acts as a substantial measure of success.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

*Procedural and Distributive Justice: Facilitating Traditional Success with New Practices*

Police responses to female sex trafficking cases heavily rely on victim-centered practices, which reflect procedural justice. These practices tend to express concern for and attention to the overall well-being of victim-survivors, wherein there is a push for greater autonomy and empowerment in decisions about coming forward and testifying. Often, these victim-centered practices are rationalized as necessary due to the challenges victim-survivors face in attaining not only convictions, but also support throughout the criminal justice process. As a result of their awareness of the limitations of the criminal justice system in responding to sex crimes, police conceive justice in alternative ways. In this way, the successful outcome of a case can deviate from distributive goals that focus on convictions to include the provision of support to victim-survivors that allow them to regain control of their life and re-integrate into society. In other words, success can be measured in terms of the “victim-survivors being okay” (Interview G). Thus, while female sex trafficking-related prosecutions and charges are an important measure of a unit’s success and performance, victim-survivors’ related measures are equally essential.

Nonetheless, although officers incite the importance of focusing on victim needs, thereby engaging in procedural justice practices (victim-centered approach), such practices also facilitate distributive justice goals. An officer explains, for example, that
he is unapologetically always aiming for the ultimate end goal: a “success system where [the] bad guy goes to the penitentiary” (Interview G). Yet, to complete this goal it is imperative that officers maintain strong and secure relationships with victim-survivors, especially given that, in sex trafficking cases, their testimony and evidence is imperative for distributive goals to be possible. As such, officers’ responses to victim-survivors of sex trafficking have important impacts on not only the investigation process, but also the likelihood of achieving justice.

As a result, we argue that, rather than exploring distributive justice (conviction) and procedural justice (victim-centered) as interrelated, human trafficking cases require procedural justice in order to attain any possibility of distributive justice outcomes. In particular, our findings show that victim-centered strategies foster not only stronger investigations, but also greater chances of conviction by promoting the willingness of victims to cooperate. This is especially crucial, as human trafficking cases rely on victims as primary witnesses, wherein securing the overall needs and support of the victim-survivor is essential to any distributive justice outcome. Additionally, our study demonstrates that ‘success’ in human trafficking cases is multifaceted, reflecting the complex victimization of victim-survivors and considering the demanding role they play in the criminal investigation of sex trafficking crimes. Through engaging in these practices, we also find that the job satisfaction experienced by officers tends to increase as well.

Our research builds on existing literature by identifying and detailing how specialized units respond to and address some of the primary challenges to investigating human sex trafficking cases. We find that, while officers are beginning to recognize the important role of victim-centered responses, they remain focused on criminal justice system outcomes by engaging with victims to assist in evidence collection and increase the likelihood of an arrest. This, in turn, frames not only the traditional policing objectives of convictions and charges, but also victim-centered approaches as restorative justice (see Farrell et al., 2019). Although the rationalization for procedural practices is, at least in part, to facilitate distributive goals, it is nonetheless beneficial for victim-survivors, as sex trafficking victims are generally more concerned with remaining safe and having their trauma acknowledged (Love et al., 2018). Thus, if officers in specialized units are prioritizing procedural justice goals, as our research suggests, there is likely to be increased incidents of victim-survivors making reports and, in turn, increased potential for convictions. In other words, because of their exposure to and experience with traumatized victims, specialized units are better-equipped with complex, victimization-specific knowledge that allows officers to handle sex trafficking cases with compassion and understanding. This is especially pertinent given that our findings also coincide with previous literature suggesting that police officers outside of specialized units report feeling out of their ‘comfort zone’ when investigating human trafficking cases (Farrell, 2009, p. 207). As such, there is a greater need for specialized training that allows officers to understand the complex victimology of human trafficking (Farrell, 2009; Farrell et al., 2014; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014).
Overall, our findings have important implications for future research. That is, further research should look not only to expand on the effectiveness of the various aspects of training in specialized units, but also how to implement reforms to the criminal justice system that focus on centralizing a move toward victim-survivor empowerment to encourage their overall recovery and well-being.

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Notes

1. We acknowledge that those who have experienced trauma/crime, such as human trafficking, both identify as victims and survivors. We have chosen to use the term victim-survivors to encapsulate both perspectives throughout the paper, with the exception of the interview quotes. We kept the terms used by the interviewee, where appropriate, which was commonly ‘victim.’

2. Human trafficking is also referred to as ‘modern-day slavery’ (Kara, 2009). In Canada, human trafficking involves elements of recruitment and transportation, as well as the exertion of control, direction, or influence upon an individual as an attempt at exploitation (Government of Canada, 2012).

3. In 2000, the United Nations adopted the Palermo Protocol, which sought to create an international legal definition of human trafficking for countries to ratify into their domestic laws (Millar & O’Doherty, 2015).

4. The officers often referred to this role as “rescuing” the victim-survivors, which could be because of the trajectory of a victim-survivor’s life while being trafficked (continued exploitation and death); however, we acknowledge the issues with this language and implications it may have on victim-survivors’ lives.
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