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Human trafficking and related forms of exploitation among incarcerated and justice-involved women: a scoping review protocol on experiences, criminal justice pathways, and identification methods

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ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Support - This review is undertaken within the CO-VISIBLES research project, "Measurement and analysis of trafficking experiences among incarcerated women: a pilot study to inform prison-related social policies and promote socio-educational well-being" (reference FCT-25-22883) (https://co-visibles.es/), funded by the Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology (FECYT) under the Research and Public Policy (I+P) funding programme (€76,000). The project is coordinated by Universidad Autónoma de Madrid in collaboration with the Spanish General Secretariat of Penitentiary Institutions (Ministry of the Interior, Government of Spain) and other Spanish universities. This evidence review does not involve the direct collection of personal data from incarcerated women.

Review stage at the time of initial registration - Formal screening of search results against eligibility criteria.

Conflicts of interest - None declared.

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Amendments - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 18 November 2026 and was last updated on 18 November 2026.

INTRODUCTION

Review question / Objective Overall objective: to identify, map, and synthesize scientific evidence on all forms of human trafficking and related experiences of exploitation in the lives of incarcerated women and other justice-involved women, and to examine procedures and instruments used to identify and measure trafficking. The review has two equally important dimensions: a substantive dimension addressing experiences, associated factors, and criminal justice pathways, and a methodological dimension addressing conceptualization, identification, and measurement.

Main question: what is known about human trafficking and related forms of exploitation among incarcerated and justice-involved women, their experiences and criminal justice pathways, possible links with criminalization, and available identification and measurement approaches?

- RQ1. What are the characteristics of available evidence by country, publication date, design, population, criminal justice setting, and publication type?
- RQ2. Which forms of trafficking and exploitation, frequency or prevalence figures, definitions, and denominators have been reported?
- RQ3. What experiences, pathways, recruitment, coercion or control mechanisms, vulnerabilities,

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other victimization experiences, and associated factors have been described?

- RQ4. What relationships are reported between exploitation and criminal justice contact, offences committed under coercion, incarceration, and the profiles or pathways of women involved in trafficking offences?
- RQ5. How is trafficking defined, identified, and measured, and what tools, indicators, procedures, and measurement properties have been reported?
- RQ6. What evidence gaps remain, and which dimensions may inform future research and the CO-VISIBLES instrument?.

Background Human trafficking encompasses multiple purposes of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, servitude, and exploitation for criminal activities. Variation in terminology and case identification makes it difficult to bring together findings from different disciplines and settings. Research involving justice-involved women and girls suggests important intersections between victimization, coercion, exploitation, offending, and incarceration (Villacampa & Torres, 2012; Fraga Rizo et al., 2024; Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2025).

A further difficulty is that some studies describe prostitution, labour exploitation, or forced criminality without explicitly labelling these experiences as "trafficking." Their potential relevance for understanding criminal justice pathways will be considered without automatically reclassifying their findings as trafficking. Evidence on identification tools is also scattered across healthcare, social services, judicial, and correctional settings (Macy et al., 2023).

Rationale A scoping review is appropriate given the breadth of the questions, the diversity of research designs, and terminological inconsistency across the field. It will distinguish evidence on adult incarcerated women, juvenile justice, and other forms of criminal justice involvement, while assessing the separate body of evidence on trafficking identification tools from any setting. Its contribution is broader than cataloguing screening instruments: it will map trafficking and exploitation experiences and their associations with criminal justice trajectories, identify conceptual boundaries, and highlight research gaps.

The review will be designed and conducted using JBI methodological guidance for scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2020, 2022; Pollock et al., 2023). The final report will follow PRISMA-ScR (Tricco et al., 2018), and the reporting of searches will be informed by PRISMA-S (Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

METHODS

Strategy of data synthesis Primary electronic searching

Electronic searches were conducted in Web of Science Core Collection (all available constituent indexes) and Scopus, without publication date, geographic, or language restrictions. Search strings were adapted to the fields and operators supported by each database. Two complementary pathways were used: (A) trafficking and forms of exploitation in relation to women and criminal justice contact, including female trafficking offenders; and (B) studies developing, using, comparing, or evaluating structured trafficking identification tools and procedures in any population or setting.

Four corresponding search strategies were implemented in both databases: S1, trafficking, women and detention or imprisonment; S2, trafficking terms in the title combined with women and criminal or juvenile justice terms; S3, women, criminal justice settings and other forms of exploitation (including forced criminality); and S4, trafficking terms combined with identification or assessment terms within three words of instrument-related terms. Web of Science topic and title fields (TS and TI) were translated to Scopus TITLE-ABS-KEY and TITLE, respectively, and NEAR/3 to W/3. Database-specific indexing and phrase processing may yield different results. No additional subject or document-type filters were applied as part of the agreed strategy.

Initial Web of Science searches yielded 170 (S1), 142 (S2), 114 (S3), and 269 (S4) records. The union of S1–S3 (export batch A) yielded 381 records; S4 excluding batch A (export batch B) yielded 264, with an overlap of five records. On 17 November 2026, the corresponding Scopus searches yielded 133, 132, 106, and 184 records, respectively. Batch A yielded 326 records; batch B yielded 179, with an overlap of five. The combined database yield was 1,150 records (645 Web of Science and 505 Scopus), before bibliographic deduplication. Each database was exported in RIS format as two mutually exclusive retrieval sets (batches A and B). The full executed search strings, dates, database coverage, restrictions and yields will be retained in a reproducible search log. Export batches are retrieval sets, not final evidence categories.

Supplementary citation searching (TARCiS)

Because terminology and indexing are inconsistent, backward citation searching (cited references) and forward citation searching (citing documents) will supplement database searching, following the TARCiS statement (Hirt et al., 2024). By default, all records meeting the eligibility criteria after full-text assessment of the primary searches

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will serve as seed references. Available citation indexes in Web of Science and Scopus will be consulted; reference lists may also be checked manually where non-indexed materials require this approach.

New records will be deduplicated against the electronic-search results and screened using the same eligibility process. If the first citation-search round yields additional eligible sources, an additional iteration using these records as seeds will be considered in light of its yield and feasibility. The seed references, citation direction, indexes, search dates, iterations, record counts, and deduplication procedures will be documented. Citation searching will supplement, not replace, comprehensive database searching.

Supplementary technical material

Original tools, manuals, and institutional reports relevant to the questionnaire may be separately documented when located through references, specialist organizations, or included studies. They will not be confused with empirical studies or portrayed as exhaustively searched if no dedicated systematic grey-literature search has been carried out.

Eligibility criteria Two inclusion pathways

Substantive PCC pathway. Population: adult or adolescent women who are incarcerated, detained, under investigation, prosecuted, convicted, involved in juvenile justice, subject to community sanctions, on parole, or in post-incarceration pathways; this also encompasses women investigated or convicted for trafficking offences. Concept: any form of trafficking and relevant experiences of sexual or labour exploitation, prostitution, forced criminality, servitude, forced begging, or other exploitation, when the study provides pertinent evidence about criminal justice contact, associated factors, or pathways. Context: prisons, detention, criminal and juvenile justice, and community sanctions worldwide; immigration detention is eligible when a relevant relationship between trafficking or exploitation and deprivation of liberty is documented. Institutional settings involving involuntary protective custody or compulsory shelter placement are also eligible where a substantive relationship with trafficking or exploitation and effective deprivation of liberty is documented. These settings will be distinguished from penal incarceration and immigration detention in the analysis.

Instrumental pathway. Studies describing, developing, using, comparing, or validating tools, indicators, or structured procedures to identify or measure trafficking are eligible regardless of population sex/gender or prison setting. This evidence will be analyzed separately from the substantive pathway.

Inclusion criteria

- I1. Any form of human trafficking related to the experiences or pathways of women involved in criminal or juvenile justice or experiencing the other eligible forms of institutional deprivation of liberty specified above.
- I2. Other forms of exploitation and prostitution among justice-involved women relevant to pathways, vulnerabilities, or criminalization, even if the original study does not use the term "trafficking".
- I3. Studies of women investigated, prosecuted, or convicted for trafficking offences, including their roles, profiles, pathways, and possible experiences of coercion or victimization.
- I4. Studies of structured trafficking identification instruments or procedures, irrespective of population or setting.
- I5. Systematic reviews, scoping reviews, and other scientific evidence syntheses related to I1–I4, labeled as secondary evidence.

Eligible designs include quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, and methodological studies; journal articles, academic theses, books and book chapters containing relevant research contributions, and scientific reviews. Mixed-sex samples may be eligible where relevant evidence on women is available, or for the independent instrument pathway. No date, country, or language restrictions will apply. Adult and juvenile populations, and trafficking victims and female offenders, will remain distinct in synthesis.

Exclusion criteria

- E1. No pertinent link to trafficking, exploitation and women's criminal justice pathways, or trafficking identification tools.
- E2. Population or setting outside scope, without relevant evidence on justice-involved women or trafficking identification tools.
- E3. Merely incidental mention of trafficking or exploitation, without findings relevant to the review questions.
- E4. Editorials, opinions, commentaries, or exclusively doctrinal works without pertinent empirical, methodological, or scientific synthesis contributions.

Prostitution, violence, exploitation, or precarious work will not automatically be classified as trafficking. Categories will follow each source's definitions and supporting evidence. Scientific reviews will be eligible as secondary evidence, without double-counting underlying primary studies; non-academic technical documents will be captured in a separate inventory. Uncertain records will be retained for further assessment at title-and-abstract screening.

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Source of evidence screening and selection Records from both databases were imported into Rayyan in RIS format. Sixteen duplicate records were initially removed from the Web of Science exports, leaving 629 records. A 25-record pilot was independently screened by two reviewers using title and abstract information. Subsequently, 505 Scopus records were added to the existing review. Cross-database deduplication was completed on 18 November 2026 through automated matching and subsequent resolution of remaining candidates, with settings intended to protect existing screening decisions and annotations. Of the 1,150 imported records, 290 duplicates were removed (16 initially and 274 subsequently), leaving 860 records for screening, including those already assessed. No flagged duplicates remained unresolved.

For the remaining title-and-abstract screening, one reviewer will assess all records. A planned independent verification sample of approximately 20% of the remaining unique records will be distributed among additional calibrated reviewers, subject to team capacity. The sample will be selected randomly, independently of the first reviewer's decisions; additional ambiguous records may be checked separately. Agreement and discrepancies, particularly potentially erroneous exclusions, will be examined before consensus, with verification expanded if warranted. This partial verification is not equivalent to complete duplicate screening and will be reported as a methodological limitation. Records marked Include or Maybe will advance to full-text assessment. At full text, eligibility under either pathway will be verified, and all proposed exclusions will receive a second independent assessment. Disagreements will be resolved by consensus or a third team member. Unavailable texts will be sought through institutional resources, repositories or author contact; non-retrieval will be reported separately. Records identified through citation searching will follow the same eligibility process.

The selection process will be reported using a PRISMA-ScR-compatible flow diagram distinguishing database records from records identified by other methods.

Data management Bibliographic records, files, and selection decisions will be kept in institutionally managed, access-restricted workspaces. A structured data-charting form or matrix aligned with the research questions will be piloted on a small heterogeneous selection of studies before full implementation. Additional team members may assist with extraction, using shared coding guidance and consistency checks.

- Identification and traceability: reference, DOI, year, country, source, and extractor.
- Design, population, and setting: objectives, methodology, sample, age, sex/gender, criminal justice context, or tool setting.
- Conceptualization: operational trafficking definition, case criteria, purposes of exploitation, and distinction from other forms of exploitation.
- Detection and measurement: tools, indicators, domains, items, procedures, administration, and reported measurement properties.
- Frequency: counts, prevalence estimates, denominators, and timeframes as stated in the source.
- Pathways and associated factors: recruitment, coercion and control, victimization, offences under coercion, relationships with incarceration, and female trafficking offenders' profiles.
- Interpretive findings and transferability: qualitative findings, limitations, evidence gaps, and indicators potentially relevant to CO-VISIBLES.

Primary evidence will be distinguished from secondary reviews to prevent double-counting. Estimates will not be recalculated or combined where case definitions or denominators are incompatible. Supplementary institutional and technical documents will be charted separately.

Reporting results / Analysis of the evidence Evidence will be synthesized descriptively, narratively, and thematically, in keeping with scoping review methodology. Studies will be characterized by publication year, country, discipline, design, source type, sample, and setting. The synthesis will map trafficking and exploitation types, coercion mechanisms, associated factors, prior experiences, criminalization pathways, and identification approaches. Particular attention will be paid to the temporal or analytical relationships between exploitation and criminal justice contact, without drawing causal conclusions from designs that cannot support them.

Where data permit, findings for adult incarcerated women, other justice-involved women, juvenile justice populations, female trafficking offenders, and general-population identification studies will be presented separately. Frequency or prevalence data will retain original denominators and definitions. No meta-analysis is planned by default because of expected conceptual and methodological heterogeneity. Formal risk-of-bias appraisal is not planned as a mandatory eligibility criterion; study limitations relevant to interpretation will nevertheless be described. Scientific reviews will be examined as secondary syntheses.

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Presentation of the results Planned outputs include a PRISMA-ScR flow diagram; a table of bibliographic and methodological characteristics; thematic tables and narrative syntheses on exploitation types, lived experiences, and criminal justice pathways; a comparative matrix of trafficking identification tools, settings, domains, and available measurement properties; and a map of evidence gaps and potential dimensions for the CO-VISIBLES questionnaire. The review will inform a peer-reviewed research article and methodological outputs supporting the wider project.

Language restriction No language limits will be applied to searching or eligibility. When relevant records are published in languages not spoken by the team, translation and verification will be pursued using available resources; any practical access or translation barriers will be reported transparently.

Country(ies) involved Spain and the United States. The review team includes researchers affiliated with Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Universitat de Girona, Universidad de Granada, Universitat de Barcelona, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), the Spanish General Secretariat of Penitentiary Institutions (Ministry of the Interior, Government of Spain), and Arizona State University (United States). Studies will be eligible regardless of country of origin.

Other relevant information Stage at protocol preparation (18 November 2026): searches in Web of Science and Scopus yielded 1,150 records (645 and 505, respectively). All records have been imported into Rayyan and deduplication is complete, leaving 860 records. The 25-record independent pilot has been completed, and title-and-abstract screening is underway. Full-text assessment, data charting, evidence synthesis and supplementary citation searching remain to be completed.

Any substantive amendment to the registered methods will be recorded with a date and rationale and reported in the final review.

Registration is being prepared after database searching and the screening pilot, with title-and-abstract screening already underway. It is therefore not a fully prospective registration preceding all searching and screening. JBI guidance, PRISMA-ScR, PRISMA-S and TARCiS will inform the review and its reporting. Subsequent methodological changes, including any additional database searches or changes to the verification sample, will be transparently documented.

References Villacampa Estiarte & Torres Rosell (2012), Mujeres víctimas de trata en prisión en España, Revista de Derecho Penal y Criminología (https://dialnet.unirioja.es/metricas/documentos/ARTREV/4070861); Fraga Rizo et al. (2024), Human Trafficking in Correctional Institutions: A Survey of Correctional and Anti-Trafficking Leaders, Journal of Human Trafficking (https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.2011660); Roe-Sepowitz et al. (2025), Dating Violence Experiences Among Sex-Trafficking Youths in Juvenile Detention, Violence Against Women (https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012241259716); Macy et al. (2023), A Scoping Review of Human Trafficking Screening and Response, Trauma, Violence, & Abuse (https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380211057273).

Methods references: Peters et al. (2020), Updated methodological guidance for the conduct of scoping reviews (https://doi.org/10.11124/JBIES-20-00167); Peters et al. (2022), Best practice guidance and reporting items for the development of scoping review protocols (https://doi.org/10.11124/JBIES-21-00242); Pollock et al. (2023), Recommendations for the extraction, analysis, and presentation of results in scoping reviews (https://doi.org/10.11124/JBIES-22-00123); Tricco et al. (2018), PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (https://doi.org/10.7326/M18-0850); Rethlefsen et al. (2021), PRISMA-S (https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-020-01542-z); Hirt et al. (2024), Guidance on terminology, application, and reporting of citation searching: the TARCiS statement (https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2023-078384).

Keywords human trafficking; incarcerated women; justice-involved women; criminal justice; sexual exploitation; labour exploitation; forced criminality; female traffickers; trafficking identification; screening tools; scoping review.

Dissemination plans Findings will be disseminated through a peer-reviewed research article and the CO-VISIBLES project's scientific and knowledge-transfer activities. Mapped evidence may also inform contextually appropriate indicators and questions for a trafficking identification questionnaire for incarcerated women, while keeping scientific synthesis distinct from instrument development.

Contributions of each author

Author 1 - Guiomar Merodio Alonso - Conceptualized and provided intellectual leadership for the scoping review; designed and drafted the protocol; contributed substantially to improving the data-charting instrument, refining the Web of Science and Scopus search guidance

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and search equations, and designing the supplementary backward and forward citation-searching strategy following TARCiS; coordinated and critically revised the protocol.
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