



The Shadow Side of Migration: Exploring the Nexus between Undocumentedness, Informality and Crime among Uzbek Migrants in Sweden

Sherzod Eraliev

Postdoctoral Researcher, Sociology of Law Department, Lund University, and Adjunct Professor, Tashkent State University of Economics
sherzod.eraliev@soclaw.lu.se

Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between undocumentedness, informality, and vulnerability to crime among migrants, using the strain theory as a conceptual framework. Research on victimisation and engagement in crime among migrants is limited, and existing studies tend to focus on one aspect rather than the interplay between the two. This study focuses on the experiences of the Uzbek community in Sweden, drawing on ethnographic observations and interviews with members of the community. The findings suggest that the undocumented and informal status of migrants can lead to strain, as they face limited access to legal means of employment and welfare services, and constant fear of deportation and social exclusion. This strain can push them towards the informal economy, where they are exposed to exploitation and victimisation. The study calls for a more nuanced approach to understanding the experiences of migrants, highlighting the need for research that explores the interplay between victimisation and engagement in criminalised acts.

Keywords

undocumented migrants, informality, crime, Uzbeks

The issue of undocumented migration¹ has become a pressing concern across Europe, and the Nordic countries are no exception. Recently, Nordic countries, including Sweden, have seen a significant increase in the number of undocumented migrants, many of whom occupy a precarious position as both potential victims of crime and potential offenders. This trend has led to increased concern in Sweden over the issue of undocumented migrants and their involvement in criminal activities (Adamson, 2020; Brå, 2021; Hansen, 2021).

Undocumented migrants are often subject to exploitation and abuse, including human trafficking, labour exploitation, and other forms of violence (Gallagher, 2015; Ollus, 2016; Vuolajärvi, 2019). They are also at risk of being victimised by other members of their own communities or by criminals who prey on vulnerable populations (Lee et al., 2001; Martinez & Valenzuela, 2006; Thomas, 2011). At the same time, other studies argue that undocumented migrants may also become involved in criminal activities themselves, as a means of

survival or as a consequence of exclusion from the social security system (Butcher & Piehl, 1998; Engbersen et al., 2007; Leerkes et al., 2012).

Despite the extensive research on the experiences of migrants, few studies have examined the complex relationship between victimisation and perpetration of crime among migrants (see, e.g., Caraballo, 2020; Scott, 2022). The existing research tends to focus on either the victimisation or the perpetration of crime by migrants, but not on the interplay between the two. This research gap is particularly relevant for migrants living in an undocumented and informal status, as they are exposed to a wide range of risks that affect their safety and well-being. In particular, there is a need for more nuanced and context-specific research that examines the interplay between structural and individual-level factors in shaping migrants' experiences. Additionally, there is a need for research that explores the ways in which migrants navigate their status as victims of crime who may also themselves be involved in criminalised activities, particularly in relation to the legal and institutional frameworks that regulate migration and crime.

In light of this research gap, the present study seeks to explore the relationship between migration, informality and crime. Specifically, this study aims to investigate how the undocumented and informal status of migrants can push them to both victimisation and engagement in criminal activities. How does the undocumented and informal status of migrants in Sweden contribute to their vulnerability to victimisation and exploitation within the community? What are the primary survival strategies employed by undocumented migrants to navigate their daily lives in Sweden, and to what extent do these strategies intersect with informal labour markets and potential involvement in illegal activities? In finding answers to these questions, this study will contribute to the current knowledge on the experiences of migrants and shed light on the complex dynamics of migration, informality and crime.

To achieve this aim, this study will investigate the experiences of Uzbek migrants, a relatively small yet growing community of migrants residing in the Stockholm metropolitan area of Sweden. As a group that is often vulnerable to exploitation and sometimes fraud by fellow migrants and members of other ethnic migrant communities, Uzbek migrants may turn to fraudulent activities as a means of survival or to extend their stay in the country.

This article draws on strain theory (Agnew, 1992; Merton, 1938) to provide a nuanced and contextualised understanding of the factors that contribute to Uzbek migrants' dual role as both victims and offenders of crime in Stockholm. Strain theory provides a useful framework for understanding the experiences of Uzbek migrants in Sweden, particularly their involvement in both victimisation and engagement in crime. As the theory argues, when individuals experience strain, such as economic deprivation, blocked opportunities, or discrimination, they may be forced to turn to criminal activities as a means of coping or adapting to their circumstances (Agnew, 1992).

This article continues with a literature review followed by a section on the theoretical framework. Next comes a methods section that will discuss data collection and interpretation strategies. The analysis section will provide a closer look at how informality and the undocumented status of migrants can push the latter to both victimisation and involvement in petty criminal activities. In the conclusion, I will consider the broader implications of the interplay between undocumentedness, informality and crime.

Literature Review

The nexus between immigration and crime has been one of the most controversial social issues for decades (Light & Miller, 2018; Stumpf, 2006). Despite some studies suggesting a positive correlation between immigration and crime rates (Adamson, 2020; Martinez &

Valenzuela, 2006), most of the research conducted on this topic both in the past and present has indicated that, at the individual level, immigrants are not more likely to engage in criminal activity than native-born individuals (Martinez & Lee, 2000; Ousey & Kubrin, 2009; Pickering & Ham, 2015)

It is also worth noting that available research suggests that undocumented immigration is generally not associated with violent crime. In fact, some studies suggest that undocumented immigrants may be less likely to engage in criminal activity than their documented counterparts, as they may be more reluctant to draw attention to themselves and risk deportation. In particular, in previous studies, using the case of the Netherlands (Leerkes, 2009) and the United States (Light & Miller, 2018), most undocumented migrants were found to refrain from criminal activity, and the participation of undocumented migrants in expressive crimes such as violence and vandalism was found to be limited (Leerkes, 2009; Light & Miller, 2018). Evidence from different countries, including Sweden and the U.S., shows that undocumented migrants face multiple forms of victimisation, including physical violence, sexual assault, robbery, human trafficking, and labour exploitation (Pickering & Ham, 2015; Scott, 2022; Stumpf, 2006).

Several studies have found that undocumented migrants are at a higher risk for victimisation compared to their documented counterparts (Bucher et al., 2010; Zadnik et al., 2016). This is attributed to their fear of being deported, lack of legal protection, and limited access to social services. Undocumented migrants are often reluctant to report crimes due to fear of immigration authorities and border police or the risk of retribution from their perpetrators (Comino et al., 2020). Research has also shown that undocumented migrants are often exploited in the workplace, with employers taking advantage of their legal vulnerability to pay lower wages, deny benefits, and subject them to dangerous working conditions (Gallagher, 2015). This can lead to situations of forced human and labour trafficking (Ollus, 2016; Vuolajärvi, 2019). Undocumented migrants may also experience violence and exploitation during their journey, including during the crossing of borders and the period of transit. They may be at risk of physical assault, theft, and sexual violence, and may be forced into smuggling drugs or other illicit goods (De Vries & Guild, 2019).

Migrants may be driven by various factors in their decision-making, which could lead to engaging in certain activities, including criminal behaviour. First, lack of legal options may push migrants to engage in crime. For example, if they are not authorised to work, they may resort to document fraud or labour law violations to earn money (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Second, migrants, especially those with an undocumented status, may experience financial strain due to their limited access to employment opportunities and social services, which may lead them to commit crimes to make ends meet (Vuolajärvi, 2019). Third, undocumented migrants may be afraid of being deported and may turn to criminal activities as a means of survival. In some cases, migrants may commit document fraud or other crimes to avoid detection by immigration authorities or as a response to state border control (Horton, 2015; Kyle & Siracusa, 2005). Fourth, migrants may be pushed to commit crimes as a survival strategy to navigate in legally opaque and restrictive environments (Urinbojev, 2020).

Overall, while the relationship between immigration and crime remains a contentious issue, it is clear that more nuanced and careful research is needed to fully understand the factors that contribute to crime rates in immigrant communities.

The link between immigration and crime has recently become quite a contentious issue in Nordic countries as well, especially in Sweden. Some studies have shown immigrants as being overrepresented in crime and delinquency in Nordic countries (see, for

example, Adamson, 2020; Brå, 2021; Hällsten et al., 2013; Kivivuori & Bernburg, 2011). This may be due to the fact that studies have often focused on studying migrants as a single group, which has resulted in a misrepresentation of the diversity and heterogeneity that exists among different immigrant populations, according to Skardhamar et al. (2014). Moreover, ‘violence of welfare bureaucracies’ in Northern Europe has also contributed to a growth in the number of crimes attributed to migrants (Abdelhady et al., 2020). Others have explained this by the assumption that immigrants are often the targets of crime policy interventions as a result of ‘cimmigration’ and racialisation of non-white immigrants (Branteryd et al., 2022; Hübinette & Lundström, 2014). However, the latest research on youth immigrants and crime in Sweden indicates a decline in self-reported offending among both first and second-generation immigrant youth (Vasiljevic et al., 2020). On the other hand, victimisation and exploitation of migrants, especially those with an undocumented status, in the Nordic context has also been well documented (e.g., Branteryd et al., 2022; Davies & Ollus, 2019; Ollus, 2016; Vuolajärvi, 2019). Adding to this complex landscape, undocumented migrants in Sweden are in a constant state of anxiety, stress, and fear due to their undocumented status (deportability), leading to various forms of victimisation, marginalisation, and social exclusion (Sager, 2011; Wahlström, 2018). They adopt survival strategies that involve maintaining anonymity, concealing their identity, and avoiding any actions that could potentially attract authorities’ attention (Wahlström, 2018).

This brief review highlights that most existing studies primarily focus on either the victimisation experienced by undocumented migrants or their potential involvement in criminal activities. Very few studies discuss how undocumented migrants can experience both victimisation and engagement in petty crimes. This study aims to offer a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of the interplay between undocumentedness, victimisation and engagement in petty crimes. In this context, this article addresses an under-researched aspect of undocumented migrants as both victims and potential offenders of petty crime by exploring the case of Uzbek migrants in Sweden.

Theoretical Framework

Strain theory, developed by Merton (1938), is a sociological perspective that explains the relationship between structural factors, individual strain and the likelihood of crime. It posits that when individuals are unable to achieve their goals through legitimate means, they experience strain, which can lead to deviant behaviour such as crime. The lack of legitimate opportunities and access to resources can create a sense of strain that may lead individuals to engage in criminalised acts (Agnew, 1992). Merton’s work on strain theory has been widely influential in the field of criminology and has been expanded upon by many other theorists. For example, Agnew (1992) developed a General Strain Theory which expanded the original strain theory to include more types of strain, such as negative emotions and dispositions, as well as the role of individual coping strategies in response to strain. The theory posits that criminogenic strains can lead to a desire to cope illegally, which in turn can weaken social control and lead to increased criminal behaviour.

Strain theory suggests that people may resort to crime to cope with or escape from the pressures and negative emotions caused by stressful situations. These strains could include chronic unemployment, financial difficulties or personal grievances. Different versions of strain theory aim to identify the types of strains that are most likely to result in criminal behaviour, explain why strains may lead to crime, and explore the factors that influence a person’s decision to respond to strain with criminal activity. For example, an individual

continuously experiencing unemployment may engage in criminal behaviour, such as theft or drug dealing, to obtain money or relieve their negative emotions (Agnew, 2014).

Many immigrants choose to migrate to high-income countries in search of better economic opportunities. However, they often encounter institutional barriers that hinder their ability and expectations to achieve economic success in their new society. The discrepancy between the goals that are culturally valued (for example, supporting left-behind family members via financial remittances) and the limited legitimate means to achieve them in reality creates more pressure for immigrants to engage in deviant behaviours compared to even the most economically deprived native-born population (Thomas, 2011). This pressure may be mainly due to the fact that immigrants come from developing countries where deprivation is considered normal. In such contexts, economic hardships, limited access to basic services, and social inequalities shape individuals' expectations and perceptions of what constitutes a standard way of life. Moving to developed countries, they may encounter stark disparities in living standards and opportunities, intensifying the pressure to succeed and improve their circumstances. Therefore, they have high expectations for an immediate payoff in the more advanced country where they have migrated to (Thomas, 2011).

Methodological Considerations

This research is based on qualitative methodologies. Between March and December 2022, I conducted several week-long field studies in Stockholm among Uzbek migrant workers. The ethnographic material was collected through observations, which involved immersing myself in the social world of the participants and observing their behaviour, interactions, and practices in their natural setting (Baker, 2006). I conducted observations at various events held by the Uzbek community (including Uzbek national celebrations and fundraising events), on-site meetings with the consul of Uzbekistan (where undocumented migrants seek legal advice), money transfer offices, cafes and small social gatherings of Uzbek migrants in their living places. In these instances, I observed their daily lives, took part in social interactions and listened to experiences of undocumentedness, exploitation and crime, as well as their strategies for navigating in these precarious conditions. Most of my informants were males, thus representing the overall gender distribution of Uzbek migrants in Sweden. My language skills in Uzbek allowed me to engage in conversations and participate in collective dialogues with migrants from Uzbekistan.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with about 15 migrants, where the latter shared their experiences of, perspectives on and attitudes towards their undocumented life in Sweden. Interviews were also conducted with official translators (between Uzbeks and Swedish authorities), an immigration lawyer, people who help with regularisation of migrants whom I call document facilitators, and semi-official leaders of the Uzbek community in Sweden. The insights gathered from the interviews with various stakeholders allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the socio-cultural, legal and bureaucratic dimensions influencing the lives of undocumented migrants, shedding light on the complex dynamics at play within the Uzbek migrant community in Sweden. While I had a set of pre-determined questions, I also resorted to flexibility and follow-up questions based on the participants' responses. I was particularly interested in understanding the daily experiences of undocumented Uzbek migrants, including the challenges they face related to informality, exploitation, and possibly petty crimes, as well as their coping mechanisms and navigation strategies in overcoming these challenges. To ensure the ethical integrity of the research, I obtained informed consent from each respondent, ensuring they were fully apprised of the study's objectives, potential ramifications and anticipated benefits.

When citing an interview (translated verbatim by myself), I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of research participants. I deliberately refrained from any involvement in covert research or inquiries into ongoing illegal activities, a measure conceived to avert any compromise to participants' well-being or the credibility of the research. The project has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (with a diary number 2022-00594-01).

Moreover, I also conducted digital ethnography on social media. This method is particularly useful for studying difficult-to-reach populations or communities, such as undocumented migrants, as it allows for non-intrusive, remote access to their everyday lives, practices and experiences (Pink et al., 2015). Since Telegram is the most popular messaging and social media platform in Uzbekistan, it is the main channel of communication and source of information for Uzbeks abroad too. There are several Telegram channels and groups that specialise in each European country (there are special Uzbek groups/channels for Sweden, Finland, Poland, Germany, etc.). I particularly focused on one designated telegram group with more than 7,000 members where Uzbeks in Sweden seek or advertise possibilities to regularise their status, job and accommodation opportunities, sell or buy goods and share their everyday experiences, as well as to seek redress against fraud and exploitation. Following this and other groups/channels allowed me to gain an understanding of the digital environment in which these migrants navigate and interact with each other on the one hand, and with Swedish authorities, local population, employers and mediators on the other. At the same time, I had to give careful consideration to ethical and privacy issues and maintain a critical awareness of the limitations and biases of digital data.

The combination of ethnographic observations, digital ethnography and interviews allowed for a more complete and in-depth understanding of the complex dynamics at play among undocumented Uzbek migrants in Sweden, and their experiences of victimisation and engagement in petty crime. Overall, I met or interacted with up to 80 Uzbek migrants (the majority of whom had an undocumented status). Their testimonies and experiences gave me an insight into what it means to be subject to an exploitative economic system and violent border bureaucracies.

Exploring the Nexus Between Undocumentedness, Informality and Crime

Setting the Context: Uzbek Migrants in Sweden

The Uzbek community in Sweden is quite new and small. Yet, it is one of the fastest growing communities in the country and stands out in regard to the share of undocumented migrants in its ranks. Officially, there are more than 5,000 individuals originating from Uzbekistan living in Sweden (SCB, 2023), but the number of undocumented migrants from Uzbekistan in the country is believed to be between 15,000 and 20,000, or three to four times more than official figures, as confirmed by numerous informal community leaders among Uzbeks. The fact that the number of Uzbek applicants for asylum in Sweden and the share of rejected applications remain quite high (Migrationsverket, 2023) for a country where there is no ongoing conflict, and where the situation with human rights compliance has improved in recent years, indicates that a significant number of the applicants are, in reality, economic migrants seeking legal ways to reside in Sweden.

Many Uzbek migrants in Stockholm live in shared rented apartments as their undocumented status may prevent them from renting accommodation independently. Sharing an apartment also allows them to save on living costs. I have seen cases when even documented migrants preferred this way to share expenses. Undocumented migrants also fear

that seeking medical care or assistance from social welfare programs could jeopardise their presence in the country and lead to negative repercussions (Jönsson, 2014; Lundberg & Spång, 2017). Some employers, such as pizzerias or companies working with subcontracts in the construction or cleaning sectors may hire undocumented migrants due to their vulnerability and willingness to accept lower wages and subpar working conditions. As a result, in some cases Uzbek migrants may face exploitation, long working hours and limited job security. In some cases, employers may also provide housing to their undocumented employees, tying their living situation to their employment, further exacerbating their dependence and vulnerability.

Uzbekistan, with a population of 36 million people, is the most densely populated country in Central Asia. Declining living conditions, high levels of unemployment, low salaries and poor human rights conditions in the country have led several million Uzbeks to seek better lives abroad. The majority of these migrants go to visa-free countries such as Russia, Turkey and Kazakhstan. However, the number of Uzbeks working in visa-imposed countries such as Japan, South Korea, the Gulf States, the Schengen zone and the U.S. has also significantly grown in recent years. Since salaries in these countries are much higher than in visa-free countries, many of them put in a lot of effort to obtain visas despite heavy bureaucratic obstacles and high fees charged by document facilitators.

The Schengen zone, and the Nordic countries in particular, is one of the most desired destinations among Uzbek would-be migrants. However, due to the lack of Swedish or other Nordic country embassies in Uzbekistan, many Uzbeks attempt to reach these destinations through other Schengen countries that have their embassies in Tashkent. Obtaining work visas, or in some cases tourism or education visas, to Poland and the Baltic states is not impossible. There is a thriving business of document facilitators who help 'applicants' not only in obtaining visas, residence, work, driving and other permits, but also in matching with potential employers and landlords, and 'relocating' them to other countries within the Schengen area. The network of often interconnected document facilitators operates in both sending (Uzbekistan), transit (Turkey and, until 2022, Russia) and host destinations in Europe. Facilitated irregular migration to Europe has become a persistent problem and Eastern European countries have become a major source and transit countries for irregular migrants on their way to Western Europe (Pullat, 2014). Usually up to two thirds of all irregular migration incidents detected by the border guard at all borders within the EU is related to misuse of the visa system, followed by incidents of illegal stay and illegal border crossing (Pullat, 2014). In short, citizens of Uzbekistan obtain short-term Schengen visas, mostly in Tashkent, and travel to Moscow (or sometimes Istanbul/Ankara) to obtain long-term (education, work, residence) visas. However, once these individuals reach their destination countries, which are mostly in Central Europe and the Baltics, they may decide to move on to other Western or Northern European countries in search of better income opportunities.

Paths to Irregularity and Informality

My respondents revealed that most Uzbeks in Sweden have come here via two ways. The first option is that Polish, Estonian or Latvian firms (often in the construction sector) get assignment (subcontract work) in Sweden and can bring Uzbek workers here. Due to their precarious situation, Uzbek or other non-EU (mostly from the former Soviet Union) citizens agree to take up jobs with significantly lower salaries, which makes hiring non-EU workers lucrative for firms. With Swedish authorities tightening up the rules on posting workers in 2020 (Arbetsmiljöverket, 2020), it has now become quite difficult for Uzbeks to 'relocate' as firm employees to Sweden from neighbouring countries.

The second option is that Uzbeks come to Sweden from these neighbouring countries on their own. There are ‘facilitators’ who can help bring them into Sweden. While the main ‘gateways’ for migrants to enter Sweden, such as Skavsta airport, the Oresund Bridge or sea-ports, are now tightly screened for potential undocumented migrants, many facilitators are still able to smuggle migrants into the country. Here, I want to emphasise that ‘being smuggled’ is not the same as having a complete lack of agency. Migrants themselves also actively seek opportunities to enter the country and thus equally participate in these ‘facilitating’ activities. It is a mutually beneficial enterprise for both a facilitator and a migrant. After entering Sweden, Uzbek migrants usually have two choices: to apply for asylum or start working outside of the regular labour market. By the time they enter Sweden, they have already explored the pros and cons of both options: directly go to a person who has promised to help with a job or give themselves up to immigration authorities to seek asylum.²

While the first option is a direct path to undocumentedness and informality, the second may also eventually lead to irregularity. In most cases, document facilitators ‘consult’ would-be asylum seekers to come up with stories that would help them persuade Swedish immigration authorities to grant asylum. Two of my respondents informed that they paid fees to those migrants whose asylum applications were successful (however, one of the cases was eventually denied and the other one was waiting for a decision). In some cases, facilitators hold mock interviews and advise their clients on a line of story, a posture, a tone and the like during asylum interviews. Even though most Uzbek migrants apply for asylum in Sweden using made-up stories with the help of facilitators and fellow migrants who have applied for asylum before, they already understand that their case will most probably be denied. My respondents’ cases, along with the narratives of other Uzbek migrants, support this statement.

According to Muhtor, an informant who assists migrants in regularising their status, the majority of asylum applications from people in Uzbekistan are rejected by the Swedish Migration Agency, *Migrationsverket*. This is often due to a lack of persuasive evidence or falling under the Dublin Regulation,³ resulting in denied cases. To help these individuals, the informant recommends appealing *Migrationsverket*’s decision in court and pursuing additional appeals if necessary, which can take up to a year and a half to complete. One significant advantage of this process is that asylum seekers can apply for jobs (or keep working) while their cases are being processed, providing some financial stability in the face of the strains of being an undocumented migrant.

Experienced migrants explain that if an asylum seeker submits their passport when applying for asylum and their identity is quickly established, they are usually granted a permit to work. However, some Uzbeks prefer to keep their passports and claim that they have lost them, which makes them ineligible to work. Muhtor explains that some Uzbeks have attempted to submit fake passports or submit their ‘green’ passports while keeping their ‘red’ passports hidden.⁴ However, this tactic is no longer effective as Uzbekistan no longer issues ‘green’ passports to its citizens. Those whose identities have been established can receive an LMA-card, which makes them eligible to work. Depending on individual circumstances, Muhtor recommends that his clients either submit their passports and reveal their identities to be able to work immediately or to claim that they have lost their passports. In cases where claiming a lost passport is not advisable, getting an LMA-card can take a significant amount of time.

In such situations, I recommend not to submit passports to those who have already managed to find informal work. This gives them time to earn as much as possible when their case is still being processed. When their appellations are denied at the [Migration] Court of Appeals, they will have

a two-week-long window before their deportation order comes out. If an *azulchi* [asylum seeker] has a 'white' job by that time, he can legally apply for a work permit.⁵ Nimble Uzbeks should be able to find 'white' jobs within this time. It's not easy of course. But some people manage [to find job and get a work permit] (*Muhtor, 42, document facilitator*).

But asylum applicants are not always able to secure jobs or regularise their status within this time period. It is indeed nearly impossible for migrants without relevant language and other professional skills to find regular 'white' jobs. This is true not only in Sweden but also in other countries. Many of the Uzbek migrants I met in Stockholm had had to resort to informal jobs to earn money, as finding regular jobs can be a challenge. Due to the high visa and travel costs, many migrants had to borrow money, which puts them in a stressful situation of having to earn as much money as possible to pay back their debts, support their families, and sustain themselves. In such cases, they often continue to remain in Sweden and resort to work in the shadows, i.e., outside the regular labour market. As my observations revealed, also confirmed by well-informed respondents, there are thousands of Uzbeks working informally, who are invisible to the authorities. The lack of legal status puts them under significant strain in their daily lives, as they are under pressure to earn money and at the same time unable to access basic rights and protections afforded to those with legal status. This strain can lead to feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and a sense of being trapped, which can increase the likelihood of engaging in criminal behaviour.

A journalistic investigation in 2019 revealed how document facilitators in Stockholm used shadowy ways to enable at least 1,100 migrants from Central Asia to illegally obtain jobs with various Swedish companies (Tolibov & Synovitz, 2019). Reportedly, the facilitator, who arrived in Sweden in 2004 from Uzbekistan, charged his 'clients' 200 to 500 euros to obtain tax numbers through fake car sales. As similar semi-legal activities were revealed, such loopholes were closed, and obtaining tax numbers, required for employment with a Swedish company, became even more difficult. My fieldwork has revealed that despite the efforts to curb irregular migration and document fraud, hundreds of Uzbeks continue to arrive in Sweden each year. Unable to find legal pathways to regularise their status, many of these individuals turn to informal channels and document facilitators to obtain the necessary permits and documents to remain in the country. This puts them at risk of exploitation and abuse and limits their access to basic rights and services.

At least half of the Uzbek migrants I met during my fieldwork in Stockholm (of about 60–70 people) had an undocumented status. Like many other undocumented migrants, they try to remain anonymous, hiding their identity and avoiding actions that could alert authorities (Sager, 2011; Wahlström, 2018). Thus, undocumented Uzbek migrants rely on informal networks and engage in irregular work, while avoiding any interactions with Swedish authorities. These challenges highlight the complex issues surrounding irregular migration, which can lead to social, economic and health strains among migrants pushing them to resort to petty crimes. This, in turn, can further complicate their integration into their host communities. The next section will explore the complex relationship between migrants and crime, examining how migrants can be both victims of exploitation and crime and perpetrators of petty crimes and how this can impact their experiences in host societies.

Victimisation and Crime

The jobs in which most Uzbek migrants are employed are mostly unskilled labour: construction, agriculture, cleaning, domestic work and the food industry. Since undocumented migrants are not able to find employment in the official labour market, they have to resort

to the informal economy, where wages are below national standards and working hours are long. Employers take advantage of these migrants' precarious and vulnerable position by ignoring national labour law standards and intimidating their employees against going to the authorities in protest over exploitative working conditions. Many migrants had to do heavy, menial, low-paying and informal jobs. The following story, from Farhod, an undocumented Uzbek migrant, is illustrative and more or less similar to those of many other undocumented Uzbek migrants who have to live in the shadows and endure precarity and insecurity in Sweden.

Farhod has been residing in Sweden for three years. He had applied for asylum as soon as he entered the country, but his asylum application was denied. Initially, when his case was under consideration by the Swedish Migration Agency, he had an LMA-card which allowed him to find a temporary, part-time position at a cleaning company in Stockholm. The outsourcing firm dispatched Farhod and his colleagues to clean hotels and offices in different parts of the city. However, due to an abundance of workers and limited assignments, Farhod struggled to secure sufficient shifts for substantial earnings. His financial concerns were particularly pressing as he not only needed to support himself but also send remittances back home. Simultaneously, Farhod engaged in a series of daily jobs. As many other Uzbek migrants in Sweden do, he would look for daily jobs through Uzbeks' group on Telegram, designated Russian-language pages on different social media platforms and TipTap, a marketplace for individuals offering or looking for short-term, daily jobs. At the same time, he was applying for different long-term, regular jobs, but he could not secure any employment until his case got a final refusal and he was given a deportation order by the Swedish authorities. However, Farhod decided to refuse to leave Sweden and instead chose to remain in the 'shadows,' since by now he has learnt how to navigate in the informal sector. Consequently, he has worked in a lot of places; picking berries, moving furniture, clearing snow, cleaning in the cruise ships and various other tasks. Like many other Uzbeks who have shared their experiences, Farhod has encountered instances of deceit. He explains his precarious and vulnerable conditions as follows:

Of course, this doesn't happen every day in Sweden, but when you don't have papers, you face deceit and fraud quite often. The last case [of non-payment] happened when another foreigner for whom I and my fellow friend unloaded sacks of rice and grains for the whole day. That guy said he would pay after we unloaded the entire container. That would take at least two full days for two people. We didn't want to work anymore because he promised the daily work, but at the end he changed his words and said the pay he meant was for the whole job. We had a verbal altercation, and I was ready to hit him. But we knew our limits; we couldn't report anywhere. And he knew that too. So, all we could do was to leave and never deal with such people again (*Farhod, 38, migrant*).

The quote accurately conveys the experience of many other undocumented migrants who are often subjected to exploitation and abuse in the informal labour market. Beyond Farhod's case, deception and exploitation span beyond sporadic daily jobs to encompass regular employment. For instance, consider the case of Nazarbek, 48, who entered Sweden three years ago using a Latvian work visa (unsuitable for Swedish employment). After a year of informal work across different roles, he applied for asylum but faced rejection. Choosing to remain in the country, Nazarbek secured a position at a ventilation installation company in Stockholm. However, his undocumented status led to a significantly reduced salary. The company's owner pledged to aid Nazarbek's regularisation after a year, conditional on hard

work and tax payments. To accommodate his lack of a bank account, the company agreed to deposit Nazarbek's wages into an acquaintance's account, for which he paid a monthly fee of 1000 kronor. Regular payslips were emailed to Nazarbek, indicating a quarter of his already modest earnings was being deducted as taxes. After more than a year of work, Nazarbek reminded his boss of the promised regularisation and pay raise. In response, his boss threatened police involvement, leaving Nazarbek unaware that hiring an undocumented migrant is also a legal violation. This coerced him to quit his job. Upon seeking assistance from a trade union aiding undocumented migrants, Nazarbek discovered that the purported payslips were fraudulent, and no tax payments had been made on his behalf.

Undocumented status puts migrants in helpless situation in front of potential abusive employers as they cannot easily report workplace abuses or exploitation without risking being reported to immigration authorities. Undocumented migrants may feel that they have no choice but to accept poor working conditions and unfair treatment because they do not have other options. This power imbalance leaves undocumented migrants trapped in low-paying jobs with little hope of upward mobility, thus perpetuating a cycle of exploitation and abuse that adds to strains migrants experience and can increase the likelihood of engaging in criminal activities as a means of survival (Thomas, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, undocumented migrants are afraid of seeking help in official healthcare facilities. Instead, when they fall sick, many undocumented migrants often turn to informal methods of healthcare. They purchase prescription drugs through designated Telegram channels, where other documented migrants bring them from Uzbekistan (as many drugs that require a prescription in Sweden are sold over the counter in Uzbekistan). Some migrants with nursing experience in Uzbekistan, but without a licence in Sweden, can even provide injection services (as many antibiotics are still administered as injections in Uzbekistan) to sick patients at their apartments for a fee. At least two informants reported the availability of an informal dentist who can offer emergency dental care (including anaesthesia, fillings and extraction) at his home with limited instruments, but I was unable to confirm whether this was a one-off emergency service provided as a favour by a former dentist or a regular informal dental care service.

When faced with a strain to increase their income, some migrants, both documented and undocumented, may take on additional, often informal, jobs outside of their normal working hours. These may include occasional or daily tasks in cleaning, moving, or construction spheres or even collecting cans and plastic bottles. While these income-generating opportunities remain within legal boundaries, it is important to emphasise that the earlier-mentioned sale of prescription drugs or the provision of healthcare services without a valid license is deemed illegal. I observed instances on Telegram channels when some individuals openly advertised dubious services such as unlawfully obtaining necessary work or residency permits, selling fuel at prices lower than in gas stations, selling prescription medicines smuggled into Sweden, offering their bank accounts (cards) or addresses for "rent", etc.

The above situation highlights the correlation between undocumentedness and informality, which can lead to migrants engaging in petty crimes or even illegal activities. And in some cases, not only undocumented, but also documented migrants resorted to informal activities to increase their income. The strains faced by undocumented migrants, combined with their lack of legitimate means to achieve their goals, can lead them to engage in deviant behaviour. Furthermore, the precarious living conditions of undocumented migrants may force them to do whatever it takes to survive, as described below by one of the informants:

I came here through Poland. It's nearly impossible to directly come to Sweden. I spent more than 5,000 [US] dollars to pay for middlemen's fees, visas, flights, etc. Now I have to earn as much as possible not only to return my debts quickly, but also to feed my family. I try to take as many jobs as possible and I try to save whenever it's possible. Sometimes, I collect cans, I try to evade paying bus fares. I even stole unattended bicycles several times and resold them. I know it's bad, but when you don't have a regular income and when debt collectors disturb your family every now and then, the pressure to earn more is so big. I am ready to do anything in these moments. (*Jamshid, 32, migrant*).

The above quote illustrates how the financial strain and lack of legal pathways can lead undocumented migrants to engage in criminalised activities.

As the presented empirical data suggest, many undocumented Uzbek migrants in Sweden face significant strains that are not shared by the general population, such as the fear of deportation, lack of access to social services, and the inability to obtain legal employment. These strains may lead them to engage in informal work, which is often exploitative and low-paying. In some cases, undocumented migrants may also resort to criminal activities, such as document fraud, theft, illegal border crossings, smuggling undeclared goods, etc. to make ends meet. The vulnerability of undocumented migrants to exploitation and criminal involvement can be understood as a result of the strains they face, on an individual as well as on a structural level (Agnew, 1992; 2014).

Conclusion

This research has discussed the nexus of undocumented migration, informality and crime in the Nordic context, using the case of Uzbek migrants in Sweden. Drawing upon the strain theory, the article has shown how migrants' undocumented status and limited access to legal means of employment can lead to significant strain, vulnerability, and susceptibility to becoming both victims and perpetrators of crime. Although studies on the experiences of undocumented migrants in the Nordic context are abundant, there is a lack of research that delves into the complex relationship between migrants as victims and potential offenders of crime.

This research has utilised strain theory to explain how undocumentedness and informality lead to vulnerability among migrants, including their susceptibility to committing and being victims of crime. In the case of undocumented migrants like the Uzbek community in Sweden, their irregular status and limited access to legal means of employment and welfare services can cause significant strain. They face constant fear of deportation and social exclusion, which can push them towards the informal economy and expose them to exploitation and victimisation. The possibility of earning money that can be sent to families in the home country outweighs the risks undocumented migrants face engaging in the informal economy and semi-legal activities. At the same time, their involvement in the informal economy and lack of legal protection can also make them more susceptible to engaging in petty crimes, either as a means of survival or as a response to the strain and negative emotions they experience.

The use of several research methods in this study provided a multi-dimensional perspective on the experiences of undocumented Uzbek migrants in Sweden, allowing for a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the interplay between victimisation and perpetration of crime. The ethnographic observations and interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of the daily experiences of migrants, their interactions with authorities, employers, mediators, and other actors, as well as their motivations for committing crimes.

It is important to note that not all migrants choose to commit crimes, and those who do should therefore not be generalised or stigmatised as being inherently criminal. Rather the

opposite, criminal activities are associated with the risk of deportation, structural violence, as well as psychological and financial strains. Many factors, including individual circumstances and social conditions, may contribute to their decision to engage in illegal activities. Moreover, the metaphor 'shadow' has been commonly employed to depict the hidden, marginalised, and often informal nature of undocumented labour. While it has been used to shed light on the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by undocumented migrants, this study recognises that it may also inadvertently reinforce a narrative of invisibility and marginalisation. Critically examining and deconstructing such metaphors is essential to avoid inadvertently perpetuating negative stereotypes or simplifications.

While the article sheds light on the vulnerabilities faced by undocumented migrants in Sweden, there are still several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study focuses exclusively on the experiences of Uzbek migrants in Sweden and does not necessarily apply to other migrant communities or to migrants in other countries. Therefore, caution should be exercised in generalising the findings beyond the specific context of the study. Secondly, the research does not explore the experiences of female migrants or other minority groups. These are important limitations as the experiences of different migrant groups may vary depending on gender, ethnicity, religion and other social factors. Future research could address these gaps in the literature by exploring the intersectionality of different factors that may affect the experiences of undocumented migrants. Finally, the study does not examine the experiences of migrants who have transitioned from undocumented to documented status. Future research could explore the factors that contribute to this transition and the extent to which it improves their social and economic well-being.

In summary, while the article provides valuable insights into the experiences of undocumented migrants in Sweden, there is still much to be explored in this field. Future research could address these limitations and deepen our understanding of the vulnerabilities and coping strategies of undocumented migrants within the nexus of undocumentedness, informality and crime.

Funding

This work was supported by Forte: Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (grant number 2021-00023), Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, and the European Commission (Central Asian Law, grant number 870647 and MOCCA, grant number 101085855).

Notes

1. In this article, the words migration/immigration and migrant/immigrant are used interchangeably.
2. It should be noted that there are people from Uzbekistan who have been granted refugee status in Sweden. However, the focus of this article is on those Uzbek migrants who use the Swedish asylum system as a means to enter the labour market (and who do not have their asylum grounds recognised in the asylum process).
3. Dublin Regulation (2013) refers to a part of EU legislation that determines which EU country is responsible for considering a person's asylum application. In most cases, the EU country through which the asylum applicant entered the EU for the first time is responsible for processing the application.
4. Between 2018 and 2021, Uzbekistan changed its citizens' passports (simply referred to as from green to red), and during this transition period some citizens could carry both passports before they exchanged their old (green) passports for internal ID-cards.
5. Here, the informant is referring to the so-called 'changing tracks' process in the Swedish migration system. According to this process, if an asylum seeker's application has been rejected but they have worked in Sweden officially or have a valid job offer, they can 'switch tracks' and apply for a permit based on employment without having to leave Sweden.

References

- Abdelhady, D., Gren, N. & Joorman, M. (Eds.) (2020). *Refugees and the violence of welfare bureaucracies in Northern Europe*. Manchester University Press.
- Adamson, G. (2020). Migrants and crime in Sweden in the twenty-first century. *Society*, 57(1), 9–21. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-019-00436-8>
- Agnew, R. (1992). Foundation for a general strain theory of crime and delinquency. *Criminology*, 30(1), 47–88. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1992.tb01093.x>
- Agnew, R. (2014). General strain theory. In G. Bruinsma & D. Weisburd (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of criminology and criminal justice* (pp. 1892–1900). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5690-2_218
- Arbetsmiljöverket. (2020). *Swedish work environment authority: Rules on posting are changing*. <https://www.av.se/en/news/2020/rules-on-posting-are-changing/>
- Baker, L. (2006). Observation: A complex research method. *Library Trends*, 55(1), 171–189.
- Brå. (2021). *Registered offending among persons of native and non-native background* (Text No. 9). Brottsförebyggande rådet. <https://bra.se/bra-in-english/home/publications/archive/publications/2021-08-25-registered-offending-among-persons-of-native-and-non-native-background.html>
- Branteryd, F., Gallo, C., Brown, E., & Svensson, K. (2022). Crime victims, immigrants and social welfare: Creating the racialized Other In Sweden. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 62(4), 948–964. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab089>
- Bucher, J., Manasse, M., & Tarasawa, B. (2010). Undocumented victims: An examination of crimes against undocumented male migrant workers. *Southwest Journal of Criminal Justice*, 7(2), 159–179.
- Butcher, K. F., & Piehl, A. M. (1998). Cross-city evidence on the relationship between immigration and crime. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 17(3), 457–493. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1520-6688\(199822\)17:3<457::AID-PAM4>3.0.CO;2-F](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1520-6688(199822)17:3<457::AID-PAM4>3.0.CO;2-F)
- Caraballo, K. (2020). From victim to criminal and back: The minority threat framework's impact on Latinx immigrants. *City & Community*, 19(2), 315–322. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cico.12495>
- Comino, S., Mastrobuoni, G., & Nicolò, A. (2020). Silence of the innocents: Undocumented immigrants' under-reporting of crime and their victimization. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 39(4), 1214–1245. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.22221>
- Davies, J., & Ollus, N. (2019). Labour exploitation as corporate crime and harm: Outsourcing responsibility in food production and cleaning services supply chains. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 72(1), 87–106. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-019-09841-w>
- De Vries, L. A., & Guild, E. (2019). Seeking refuge in Europe: Spaces of transit and the violence of migration management. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(12), 2156–2166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1468308>
- Engbersen, G., van der Leun, J., & de Boom, J. (2007). The fragmentation of migration and crime in the Netherlands. *Crime and Justice*, 35, 389–452. <https://doi.org/10.1086/650189>
- Gallagher, A. T. (2015). Exploitation in migration: Unacceptable but inevitable. *Journal of International Affairs*, 68(2), 56–74.
- Hällsten, M., Szulkin, R., & Sarnecki, J. (2013). Crime as a price of inequality? The gap in registered crime between childhood immigrants, children of immigrants and children of native Swedes. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 53(3), 456–481. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azt005>
- Hansen, P. (2021). *A modern migration theory: An alternative economic approach to failed EU policy*. Columbia University Press.
- Horton, S. (2015). Identity loan: The moral economy of migrant document exchange in California's Central Valley. *American Ethnologist*, 42(1), 55–67. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12115>
- Hübinette, T., & Lundström, C. (2014). Three phases of hegemonic whiteness: Understanding racial temporalities in Sweden. *Social Identities*, 20(6), 423–437. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2015.1004827>

- Jönsson, J. H. (2014). Local reactions to global problems: Undocumented immigrants and social work. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 44(1), i35–i52. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcu042>
- Kivivuori, J., & Bernburg, J. G. (2011). Delinquency research in the Nordic countries. *Crime and Justice*, 40, 405–477. <https://doi.org/10.1086/658890>
- Kyle, D., & Siracusa, A. (2005). Seeing the state like a migrant: Why so many non-criminals break Immigration laws. In Willem van Schendel & I. Abraham (Eds.), *Illicit flows and criminal things: States, borders, and the other side of globalization* (pp. 153–176). Indiana University Press. <https://www.ssrc.org/publications/illicit-flows-and-criminal-things-states-borders-and-the-other-side-of-globalization/>
- Lee, M. T., Martinez, R., & Rosenfeld, R. (2001). Does immigration increase homicide? Negative evidence from three border cities. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 42(4), 559–580. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2001.tb01780.x>
- Leerkes, A. (2009). *Illegal residence and public safety in the Netherlands*. Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789089640499>
- Leerkes, A., Engbersen, G., & van der Leun, J. (2012). Crime among irregular immigrants and the influence of internal border control. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 58(1), 15–38. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-012-9367-0>
- Light, M. T., & Miller, T. (2018). Does undocumented immigration increase violent crime? *Criminology*, 56(2), 370–401. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12175>
- Lundberg, A., & Spång, M. (2017). Deportability status as basis for human rights claims: Irregularised migrants' right to health care in Sweden. *Nordic Journal of Human Rights*, 35(1), 35–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18918131.2017.1285953>
- Martinez, R., & Lee, M. T. (2000). On immigration and crime. *Criminal Justice*, 1(1), 486–524.
- Martinez, R., & Valenzuela, A. (Eds.). (2006). *Immigration and crime: Race, ethnicity, and violence*. New York University Press.
- Menjívar, C., & Abrego, L. (2012). Legal violence: Immigration law and the lives of Central American immigrants. *American Journal of Sociology*, 117(5), 1380–1421. <https://doi.org/10.1086/663575>
- Merton, R. K. (1938). Social structure and anomie. *American Sociological Review*, 3(5), 672–682. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2084686>
- Migrationsverket. (2023). *Statistik*. Statistics on migration matters. <https://www.migrationsverket.se/Om-Migrationsverket/Statistik.html>
- Ollus, N. (2016). Forced flexibility and exploitation: Experiences of migrant workers in the cleaning industry. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 6(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.19154/njwls.v6i1.4908>
- Ousey, G. C., & Kubrin, C. E. (2009). Exploring the connection between immigration and violent crime rates in US cities, 1980–2000. *Social Problems*, 56(3), 447–473. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2009.56.3.447>
- Pickering, S., & Ham, J. (Eds.). (2015). *The Routledge handbook on crime and international migration*. Routledge.
- Pink, S., Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T., & Tacchi, J. (2015). *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice*. SAGE.
- Pullat, R. (2014). Facilitated irregular migration towards Scandinavia, Central and Western Europe via Estonia in the period of 2008–2013. *Internal Security*, 6(2), 29–38. <https://doi.org/10.5604/20805268.1157155>
- Sager, M. (2011). *Everyday clandestinity: Experiences on the margins of citizenship and migration policies* [Thesis, Lund University]. <http://lup.lub.lu.se/record/1770355>
- Scott, H. (2022). Survival over safety: Non-reporting of criminalised violence by young migrants excluded from protection. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(19), 4793–4810. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2099362>
- Skardhamar, T., Aaltonen, M., & Lehti, M. (2014). Immigrant crime in Norway and Finland. *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, 15(2), 107–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14043858.2014.926062>

- SCB (2023). Swedish Statistics Agency. Population. Available at: <https://www.scb.se/en/finding-statistics/statistics-by-subject-area/population/>
- Stumpf, J. (2006). The crimmigration crisis: Immigrants, crime, and sovereign power. *American University Law Review*, 56(2), 367–419. <http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/aulr/vol56/iss2/3>
- Thomas, P. M. (2011). Theoretical articulation on immigration and crime. *Homicide Studies*, 15(4), 382–403. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088767911424539>
- Tolibov, S., & Synovitz, R. (2019). Revealed: how fake used-car sales let migrants slip into Swedish workforce. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. December 2, <https://www.rferl.org/a/fake-used-car-sales-in-sweden-let-migrants-slip-into-workforce-/30303946.html>
- Urinboev, R. (2020). *Migration and hybrid political regimes: Navigating the legal landscape in Russia*. University of California Press.
- Vasiljevic, Z., Svensson, R., & Shannon, D. (2020). Immigration and crime: A time-trend analysis of self-reported crime in Sweden, 1999–2017. *Nordic Journal of Criminology*, 21, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2578983X.2019.1688955>
- Vuolajärvi, N. (2019). Governing in the name of caring—The Nordic model of prostitution and its punitive consequences for migrants who sell sex. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 16(2), 151–165. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-018-0338-9>
- Wahlström, Å. (2018). ‘Hiding in plain sight’: Daily strategies and fear management among undocumented refugee children in Sweden. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 31(4), 588–604. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fex046>
- Zadnik, E., Sabina, C., & Cuevas, C. A. (2016). Violence against Latinas: The effects of undocumented status on rates of victimization and help-seeking. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 31(6), 1141–1153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260514564062>