



Labour exploitation and work-related crime. The reshaping of the Norwegian media discourse on human trafficking and social dumping

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Summary

This article explores the emergence of the term ‘work-related crime’ and its increased prominence in Norwegian public discourse. Analysing newspaper content from the years 2000–2023, the study combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to media analysis to study how this novel concept relates to previously established discourses on labour exploitation of migrant workers. Drawing on Bacchi’s ‘What is the Problem Represented to be’ (WPR) approach, the article identifies four typical media representations of work-related crime in which discourses on organised and economic crime relate to claims about changing labour market relations and victimisation. By shedding light on these critical issues, the study seeks to deepen our understanding of the ways media discourse represents the issue of migrant workers’ rights in a Nordic context.

Keywords

work-related crime, social dumping, human trafficking, labour exploitation, media analysis

Introduction

In 2017, the then Prime Minister of Norway, Erna Solberg of the Conservative party, sent a letter to the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, advocating for increased collaboration between European Union member states in order to safeguard social structures and fair market competition against what was framed as a new form of organised and economic crime, termed ‘work-related crime’. Enclosed was a 26-page report summarising Norway’s experiences in the area. This report essentially promoted a ‘Norwegian model’ as a blueprint for European policy development and sought to align policies against work-related crime with established policies against ‘undeclared work’ and ‘fair working conditions.’ The report further states that the Norwegian government applies “a broader definition than that commonly used in the EU” and defines work-related crime as a form of multi-criminality “concerning pay and working conditions, social security and taxation. These are organised activities that exploit employees, distort competition and undermine social structures” (Prime Minister’s Office, 2017, p. 7).

While we have yet to see the full outcome of the Norwegian initiative towards the EU, it is possible to point to subsequent changes taking place in Norway’s neighbouring countries. During 2022 and 2023, a total of seven regional centres for preventing work-related

crime were opened across Sweden with the aim of facilitating joint inspections (Ministry of Employment, 2023). In 2023 the Nordic Council of Ministers decided to establish a formal Nordic-Baltic network, to enable a more stable funding for cross-border efforts against crimes in the labour market. The initiative comes after several years of discussion, in which central actors have argued that a cross-country collaboration is essential, irrespective of the distinctive and sometimes confusing terminology used in separate Nordic states (see e.g. Kvam 2018, 19 April). The Norwegian government uses the term ‘work-related crime’ when communicating internationally, while several words make up the lexical field within the Norwegian language (Jahnsen et al., 2022). For the purpose of this article, I use the term work-related crime to covers all variations (e.g. ‘arbeidslivskriminalitet’, ‘arbeidsmarkeds kriminalitet’, ‘arbeidsmiljøkriminalitet’, ‘arbeidskriminalitet’, ‘A-krim’).

Previous research on work-related crime has mainly investigated institutional practices through document studies and interviews (Bjelland & Vestby, 2017; Jahnsen, 2014; Jahnsen og Rykkja, 2023; Lohne & Drevland, 2019; Lohne et al., 2023; Lægreid & Rykkja, 2022; Neby et al., 2016; Skovly et al., 2017; Vestby, 2022, 2023). This study takes a different approach by examining the discursive development of the concept of work-related crime, and how the phenomenon is portrayed and framed in public media. In doing so, it seeks to explain the ways in which the discourse on work-related crime gained prominence as a strategy for addressing labour exploitation in Norway. To achieve this, the analysis combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to media analysis to examine media texts published between 2000 and 2023, and seeks to answer the following research questions: How is the problem of labour exploitation represented, and how does work-related crime relate to other existing concepts such as ‘social dumping’ and ‘human trafficking’? Which types of problem representations can be identified in media representations of work-related crime, and which binaries, key concepts, categories and ‘silences’ are operating within these?

The article is theoretically and methodologically inspired by the post-structuralist framework of Carol Bacchi’s ‘What is the Problem Represented to be’ (WPR) approach (2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) and expands on previous media analysis conducted with colleagues (Jahnsen et al., 2022).¹ The WPR approach breaks with the idea that policies and policymaking are simply results of politicians responding to problems. It rather suggests that policies are created through discursive representations of ‘problems’ or collective sense-making, and that these are ‘constructed’ or ‘produced’ via discourses. Discourses are here understood as ‘socially produced forms of knowledge’ (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 35). While studying ‘problematizations’ is usually employed in the analysis of policy documents (Bacchi, 2012), this article offers an example of how media texts can be analysed through ‘the lens of a structuring question’ (Bacchi, 1999, p. 8 in Stenvoll, 2002). Employing a discourse analytical approach to media allows us to investigate the evolution and influence of specific concepts and definitions, in this case the emergence of the term ‘work-related crime’, and examine the interplay of different discourses and ‘problematizations’ associated with it (Bacchi, 2021).

Before presenting my analysis, I provide a brief overview of the policy development in this area, followed by an outline of Bacchi’s WPR approach and the methods used to collect and analyse data. In the first part of the analysis, I examine the relationship between ‘work related crime’, ‘social dumping’ and ‘human trafficking’ and identify what we might call a ‘rise and fall’ in media attention. In the second part, I describe and discuss four dominant problem representations of work-related crime. An important finding from this study is that the broad and imprecise definition of work-related crime not only has allowed consolidation among agents in the control sphere (as described by Bjelland and Vestby, 2017,

and Vestby, 2022, 2023), but also seems to nurture a broader range of overarching social concerns, evoking discourses about economic and organised crime, labour exploitation and illegal migration, economic growth and fair market competition, as well as the future and sustainability of the welfare state.

Labour exploitation as work-related crime in context

There is no legal definition of work-related crime. Governmental policy documents describe it as a generic term for a wide range of activities, including, but not limited to:

tax-related crime, gross breaches of accounting and bookkeeping practices, corruption, bankruptcy crime, money laundering, foreign currency smuggling, human trafficking, social security fraud, serious fraud, use of false identities, registration of incorrect information in public registers, violations of pay and working conditions and use of illegal workers. (Prime Minister's Office, 2017, p. 8)

In Norway, the emergence of this new concept or terminology for unwanted labour market activities not only signifies shifts in language but also the emergence of new knowledge regimes, institutional practices and political priorities (Jahnsen et al., 2022). While the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion launched the first national strategy against work-related crime in 2015, the subsequent four revised government strategies have been anchored at the Prime Minister's Office. During this period, an increasing number of ministries have become involved, not only reflecting a continuously developing policy discourse, but also the widely accepted notion that work-related crime is a cross-sectoral 'wicked problem'. This term, originally introduced by Rittel and Weber (1973), is used to describe complex policy issues requiring holistic approaches, and thus as a precursor for the need to establish multi-agency responses and public private partnerships. Combined with the broad and expansive definition of work-related crime, this has served as the basis for extensive public innovation and coordination in which significant organisational restructuring has taken place, with the aim of enhancing the analytical and punitive capacities of the Police, Tax Authority, the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, and the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration in particular (Jahnsen & Rykkja, 2020).

As a policy area, work-related crime is characterised by its complexity and novelty, as its wide definition has served as a framework to re-evaluate traditional labour market policies and argue for more punitive and targeted crime prevention strategies, including extended access to the use of concealed coercive measures during investigation, deterrence and prevention. As such, framing labour exploitation as 'work-related crime' can be seen as an effective strategy to connect workers' rights issues to a broader context of criminal justice and national threats, and thus open what some refer to as 'the full sanction catalogue' of policing and regulatory powers (Bjelland & Vestby, 2017). However, while the expansive definition of 'work-related crime' arguably has reshaped policies as well as police methods targeting economic and organised crime in the labour market, assessing its impact from a worker's rights perspective remains a challenging and multifaceted issue.

Currently, the exploitation of workers is recognised as one of the most common forms of work-related crime (NTAES, 2020), suggesting that this constitutes a top priority for law enforcement and their partners. Yet, none of the existing policy documents on work-related crime contains a clear definition of 'exploitation'. Instead, it is stated that while work-related crime is 'closely associated' with social dumping, not all forms of social dumping are considered to be work-related crime (see e.g. Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, 2022a);

‘While work-related crime involves criminal offences, social dumping can also entail improper working conditions that do not entail any breach of regulations’ (Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, 2022b, p. 3). Put differently, social dumping, although related, differs in that it focuses primarily on low-wage competition and discrimination against migrants, capturing practices beyond the purview of criminal law. In contrast, human trafficking is explicitly defined in the Norwegian legislation, as well as incorporated into the definition of work-related crime and commonly cited as its most severe form (see e.g. KOM, 2023). Policy documents against work-related crime typically refer to ‘gross exploitation’ and ‘forced labour’ as human trafficking in male dominated sectors, while implicitly excluding other forms of exploitation. Thus, work-related crime policies break with common understandings of human trafficking that more narrowly associate it with sex work and prostitution policies, and could as such be seen as a more progressive approach to human trafficking policies. However, as pointed out by Brunovskis and Ødegård (2022), there is a danger that the binary logic of the criminal law continues to exclude large groups of workers. They further argue that so-called ‘grey areas’ in the Norwegian legislation allow migrants to be grossly exploited without the legal conditions for criminal charges being met. Similar concerns have been raised by The Council of Europe Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA, 2022), who warn against situations where victims of labour exploitation are considered as instances of social dumping by Norwegian officials. As a result, labour migrants may have been handled through administrative measures and exposed to rapid deportations without proper screening for labour exploitation, and as such deprived of their right to assistance and legal aid.

A WPR approach to media analysis

The purpose of the WPR (What is the Problem Represented to be?) analysis is to question established discourses that govern policies and practices, to rethink our approaches to ‘social problems’ and allow for scrutiny and potential change (Bacchi, 1999, 2009, 2012, 2021; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Bacchi’s framework draws from ideas known as post-structuralism, feminism and social constructivism as well as Foucault’s notion of governmentality, and as such offers a multidisciplinary approach that breaks with traditional policy analysis. Rather than viewing policymaking as direct responses to problems, WPR suggests that policies are shaped through discursive representations of ‘problems’, constructed via socially generated discourses (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 35). Compared to other approaches to discourse analysis, WPR is described as offering a practical and more robust methodology that also allows us to ask about what remains unproblematised in certain representations (Chan, 2018; Riemann, 2023).

Moving from ‘thinking about problems to thinking with problematisations’ (Vitellone, 2022), this approach has been applied to analyse various criminological themes, including the impact of anti-trafficking, prostitution and labour policies (see e.g. Stenvoll, 2002; Jahnsen, 2008; Spanger, 2023; Schoultz et al., 2023; Spanger et al., forthcoming). While these studies focus on policy, representation and the law, this article applies WPR to media analysis. While Bacchi contends that WPR can be applied to ‘any materials that make some sort of proposal about how things ought to be’ (Bacchi, 2021), she initially hesitated to apply WPR to media analysis. Her reluctance partly stems from her respect for well-established research fields in which she has no formal training, but also her view that statements in the media are often associated with specific actors, while WPR focuses on governmental logics (and often text without a specific author) (Bacchi, 2021). Thus, applying WPR to media analysis requires probing underlying conceptual logics, akin to analysing policy texts.

Applying a WPR approach to media analysis does not suggest a direct link between media, policymaking and lived experiences. Still, it is based on the assumption that news media have the power to influence public opinion through an agenda setting role; by framing a particular perspective in ways that tells audiences what to think about, how to think about it, and what to do about it (Bacchi, 2009, p. xvii; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Applying the WPR perspective to media texts aims to encourage reflection on how defining a 'problem' also influences governance, and how a particular way of thinking about a 'problem' also shapes the associated forms of governing and effects (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 18). By taking departure in questions related to how labour exploitation is represented as a particular sort of problem (work-related crime), this study does not approach labour exploitation or work-related crime as inherent or given problems with any fixed solution. Rather, these social phenomena are studied as 'problematizations' in which meaning is continuously evolving as part of a changing media discourse.

Methods

The article analyses media texts published in Norwegian news media between 2000 and 2023. To achieve this, I have used the online electronic news archive Retriever/Atekst, which is a database containing sources from national, regional and local media, some dating back to 1945.² The analysis consists of two steps; one broad in scope, and one narrow. In the first part, I analyse the use of the relevant terms over time and include both non-editorial and editorial news items in national, regional and local media outlets between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2023. This enables a broad search in 3061 sources, and includes printed as well as online sources, TV and radio.³ The analysis is based on three individual search strings on work-related crime, social dumping and human trafficking, that together capture an overall picture of change and development over the period.⁴ The search yielded a total of 192,526 text items that include the Norwegian terms for social dumping (94,603), human trafficking (72,595) or work-related crime and closely related terms (25,328).⁵ This sample was analysed quantitatively using the Retriever software, which allows comparisons. The figures presented below are created using Excel with data exported from Retriever.

As the second step in the analysis, I made a strategic selection of news items to enable a qualitative analysis of media representations of work-related crime. I limited my search to printed texts in the three largest national editorial newspapers in Norway (Medienorge, 2023): *Aftenposten*, *Dagbladet* and *VG*. As all of these are based in Oslo, I also included three regional newspapers: *Adresseavisen* (Trondheim), *Bergens Tidende* (Bergen) and *Stavanger Aftenblad* (Stavanger) to capture regional variation. This reduced my text corpus to 912 text items. To reduce the material further, I used a search string that only returns hits if at least one of the words is mentioned in the title or preamble of the article, in addition to a minimum length requirement of 200 words.⁶ After a qualitative exclusion of duplicates and texts deemed irrelevant, this left me with 143 items. Most of these texts were news reports, but they also included editorials and letters to the editor. In line with the WRP approach, the analysis does not consider differences between text types, media outlets or specific authors or editors, as the analysis does not operate at the level of actors' opinions (Bacchi, 2021). Rather, the four categories of media representations presented later in this article can be seen as entities that contain overlapping, contradictory, and sometimes shifting discourses. Given the nature of journalism and genre, an individual text item will usually contain several problem representations, which are neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily divisible into separate categories. Thus, the four categories are constructed for analytical purposes and point to the coexistence of several overlapping problem representations.

Findings

While acknowledging the longer historical context of discourses surrounding labour exploitation, for the purpose of this article, the first section of the analysis focuses on shifts in media discourses taking place between 2000 and 2023. It aims to explain how the discourse on work-related crime intersects with media discourses on social dumping and human trafficking.

Three observations stand out when comparing across the timeline and when analysing each discourse separately. The first observation is that social dumping and human trafficking emerged as two separate public discourses around 2003 and 2004, within two distinctive political contexts. The second observation is the shift that took place around 2013–2014, in which the concept of work-related crime emerges, and largely converges with the two former discourses. The third observation is that it appears as though there is an overall ‘rise and fall’ in media attention, also when the three discourses are studied together over the period of two decades.

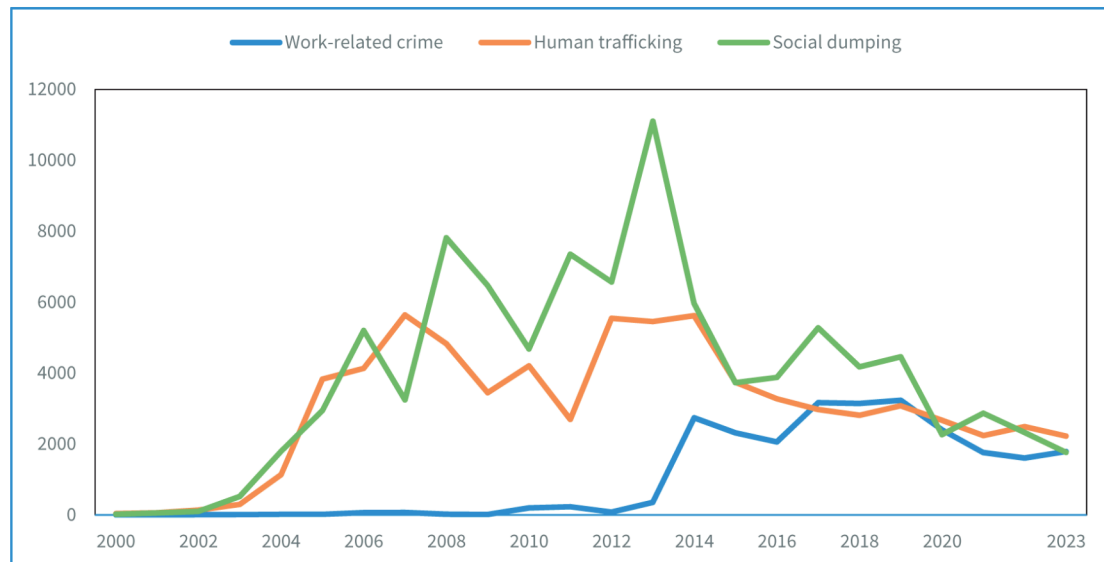


Figure 1. Development of media coverage in the period 2000–2023. Words counted: social dumping, human trafficking and work-related crime.

The first observation aligns with political attention during the same period, the EU and EEA enlargement and the ratification of the United Nations Palermo Protocol (Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children). This period is also marked by increased migration to Norway, with both regulated labour migration and irregular migration becoming hotly debated political issues (Karlsen, 2021; Steinkellener, 2022). While the discourse on social dumping centres around concerns relating to labour migration from Eastern Europe and so-called ‘new EU countries’, a substantial part of the media attention to human trafficking concerns the increased visibility of street prostitution and changing prostitution policies, in which client criminalisation gained increasing support (Jahnsen, 2008; Skilbrei, 2012). In contrast, the issue of forced labour receives marginal public attention during this initial phase (Jahnsen, 2014; Jahnsen & Skilbrei, 2015).

The second observation aligns with political discussions leading up to the parliamentary election in 2013, in which labour relations, social dumping and work-related crime

emerged as prominent issues. The election was won by the conservative right-wing coalition, resulting in a shift in government power for two electoral periods (2013–2021), during which the first national strategy against work-related crime and its following three revised versions were launched. As shown in Figure 1, there is minimal mention of work-related crime prior to this period (see the lower graph). To understand the significance of this shift in public discourse, it is relevant to consider the simultaneous decrease in attention given to social dumping (see the upper graph). One interpretation of this is that a substantial part of the media attention in this period centres around national policy events and policing activities against work-related crime, hereunder the continuous establishment of new collocated multi-agency task forces (Jahnsen et al., 2022). Simultaneously, media often cover ongoing investigations and high-profile cases, that is to say, cases involving well-known companies and public figures or severe forms of exploitation. The so-called Lime investigation being a case in point, described as a ‘signal case’ that served to broadcast work-related crime as a concept for a larger audience and got politicians as well as people within the police and prosecution “fired up” (quoted in Vestby, 2022).

Seen together, the three graphs not only reflect a rhetorical shift and increased attention towards work-related crime, but also a reduction in overall attention during the end of the period. This is supported by a discernible pattern of ‘rise and fall’ in media attention, which seems to have been accelerated during the ‘pandemic years’. However, while it is true that the overall media attention has dropped considerably since its peak in 2013–2015, one might argue that the issue still attracts considerable media attention. This is also true after a new political left coalition came to power in October 2021 (the Støre Cabinet), which to a large extent has adopted the previous government’s rhetoric on work-related crime (see e.g. Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, 2022a).

Problem representations of work-related crime

Drawing on Bacchi’s ‘What is the Problem Represented to be’ (WPR) approach, the following sections identify four typical media representations of work-related crime: as a problem of organised and economic crime, as a problem of labour exploitation, as a problem of unfair and illegal market competition, and as a threat to the social order and the future of the welfare state. All four categories are policy-oriented, offering specific claims about what type of challenge work-related crime poses, while simultaneously adhering to its broad definition. The four categories are, as such, not mutually exclusive, as an individual news story can encompass several themes to provide a holistic account of a particular story. In the following, I will present these overarching themes and provide analysis on the most notable linguistic features, such as which binaries, key concepts, categories and ‘silences’ are operating within these representations.

Work-related crime as organised and economic crime

The most prominent media representation of work-related crime is that of a new form of crime that not only transcends former understandings of economic and organised crime, but whose complexity and severity requires a stronger focus on policing and inter-agency cooperation. Work-related crime is here described as incorporating a multitude of serious offences, such as human trafficking and illegal labour, and the vocabulary used is tightly linked to economic offences (e.g. ‘black economy’, ‘document fraud’). In certain news items, work-related crime is likened to mafia activities, featuring stories of criminals who have ventured into legal sectors for quicker and easier profits, such as construction, where they launder money and camouflage their business behind an ostensibly lawful façade. This problem

representation breaks with former discourses about ‘unseriousness’ in the labour market, at the same time as crime and flawed crime control is given increased prominence. Headlines such as ”This is how the gangs infiltrate Norway in 1-2-3” (Bartnes et al., 2015, 19 May) and imagery of mafia “taking over” or “conquering” Norway not only illustrate the use of hyperbole but also alludes to the idea that the legal economy as well as the Norwegian police is under attack.⁷ A recurring theme in many of these news stories attributes this development to the liberalisation of labour market regulations, allowing for increased labour migration and international market competition, which has rendered former regulation and control measures insufficient.

The WPR approach highlights that discourses are not singular, but plural, and that multiple, competing and sometimes contradictory discourses exist (Bacchi, 2009, p. 36). This implies that we should expect to find several answers to the question ‘What is the problem represented to be?’, but also suggests a need to identify discourses with a higher authority, typically those supported by institutions and established practices. While news items about work-related crime tend to give higher status to problem representations focusing on organised and economic crime, border regulation and increased labour migration are also frequently connected topics. In the early phase of the news coverage, a politician from the party Rødt (socialist left), for example, argued that the Schengen agreement had created a “freeway for East European mafia” and that:

[F]raud with undeclared work and tax evasion has become so easy that criminal networks from Eastern Europe start with labour crime rather than drugs and petty theft. Why steal wallets when they can defraud the treasury directly? (Moxnes, 2014, May 8)

Under the headline “Stop the mafia at the border”, he continued by arguing that: “Much of the criminal activity is only possible through the use of hired labour that is underpaid and exploited” (Moxnes, 2014, May 8). His statement illustrates the interconnected nature of discourses and coexistence of problem representations in media coverage, as mentioned above, and also brings us to the second problem representation, focusing on labour exploitation.

Work-related crime as labour exploitation

The second typical problem representation centres around labour exploitation and the assertion that migrant workers often endure poorer wages and harsher working conditions than Norwegians. In many cases, the news items referred to a form of ‘social dumping’ where workers, often depicted as Eastern European, are subject to discriminatory and exploitative labour conditions. All these news stories combined paint a grim picture of their working conditions, from labourers facing violence, pressure or coercion to descriptions of unsafe, uncertain and unpredictable circumstances. References to ‘modern slavery’ and accounts of ongoing court cases and investigations of human trafficking contribute to the gravity of this overall media narrative (see for example Sønderland, 2014, 8 Nov).

Additionally, there are several accounts of exploitation in the form of ‘illegal work’, involving the hiring of personnel without work permits and so-called ‘rejected asylum seekers’ living in Norway without resident permits. Some migrants are portrayed as willingly participating in the so-called ‘black’ and ‘grey’ labour market. An example is the story titled “This Man Does Not Exist”, which recalls the journey of a painter called ‘Juan’ from Latin America, who came to Norway after the 2008 financial crisis to support his wife and daughter in Spain. The painting jobs are assigned to Juan by a painting company, where two employees work legally, while Juan and three others work illegally and evade taxes. Juan describes his life “in the shadows” by

saying “If the police come while I’m painting, I put down my broom and disappear. Like that, he says and snaps his fingers”. (Kvamme, 2015, 21 Nov).

From a WPR perspective, framing an issue holds significant importance as it not only shapes public perception, but also influences how individuals are perceived and treated (Bacchi, 2009; Schoultz et al., 2023). While Juan’s story can be interpreted in the context of discourses on failed or absent immigration control, other news stories report on the issue of migration control through so-called ‘tag-along journalism’, where journalists accompany multi-agency control activities leading to deportations of so-called ‘illegal immigrants’. These narratives challenge ideas about an ‘ideal victim’ (Christie, 1986), as well as the binary opposition between victim and criminal, creating ambiguous portrayals of migrant workers who are not only represented as passive victims, but also as capable of breaking the law themselves. Consequently, news stories emphasising the issue of labour exploitation do not oppose or challenge calls for more state intervention, policing and control, but rather seem to position migrant workers as potential targets of the new control regime, not merely beneficiaries of ‘rescue missions’ by the state.

Work-related crime as unfair competition

The third theme of problem representations is based on the assertion that work-related crime poses a societal problem that undermines legitimate businesses and threatens free and fair market competition. The central claim is that law-abiding business owners are at risk of losing out in competition with criminals who disregard quality and safety regulations. There is simultaneously a concern that this unfair competition over time will lead business owners into the ‘grey’ and ‘black’ economy. Work-related crime is thus claimed to have a contagious effect which makes it increasingly difficult to operate legally, but also to separate serious businesses from criminal enterprises.

The idea that legal businesses, or even whole sectors, can turn criminal or criminogenic implies somewhat conflicting ideas about who is at risk of becoming victimised, as well as involved in criminal activity. In terms of labour market regulation, work-related crime signals a shift in rhetoric in which breaches and illegality are viewed much more harshly than before. This can be illustrated by the following statement from former Labour and Social Affairs Minister Robert Eriksson (from The Progressive Party, Frp), who in 2014 stated that:

Now it is off with the silk gloves: The government is strengthening its efforts against work related crime. We will catch those who break the rules and at the same time make it easier for those who operate seriously. (Eriksson, 2014, 23 Oct)

A few years later, his successor, Anniken Hauglie (from the Conservative party, Høyre) similarly stated that “crooks who do not shy away from any means [...] should be hunted down” (Nilsen, 2019, 27 Sep). This implies that this particular tone is not limited to a specific minister or political party, but appears increasingly widespread. Likewise, labels such as ‘thugs’, ‘criminals’, ‘EEA-imported gangs’ are used with increased familiarity in the period of study, as we also saw in previous presented categories focusing on economic and organised crime. This language stands apart from the discourse on social dumping, which has tended to centre around the distinction between ‘serious’ and ‘unserious’ actors, and is used, as we can see in the quotes above, in support of more intrusive control activities.

According to the WRP approach, analysing public discourse allows us to identify how imaginable political strategies are structured, but also how successful representations of problems can “limit what is talked about as possible or desirable, or as impossible and undesirable”

(Bacchi, 2016). While the desire for more control is a general and largely unchallenged call across all four categories of problem representations, better and more targeted supervision mechanisms seem more salient in examples of discourse that can be placed in this third category. For example, one article describes the aftermath of a multi-agency control event at one of Trondheim's finest restaurants during peak hours, which drew the ire of the regional director of The Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise, who is cited arguing that:

Kebab restaurants in Trondheim pump out black and grey kebabs while one of Norway's best and most serious chefs [...] is met by 10–15 state-employed inspectors on overtime pay. I thought we were moving towards more risk-based supervision, but I was clearly boundlessly naive. I have rarely felt such anger towards the state and municipality! (Bævre et al., 2015, 11 Dec)

Bacchi's elaboration of the real-life and lived effects of problem representations draws upon Foucault's concept of 'dividing practices,' which serve to differentiate various groups as 'governable subjects' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; Stenvoll, 2002). By evoking ideas about distinctions and exemptions, 'serious' and 'law-abiding businesses' can be separated from the problem at hand, in this case criminals and tax evaders. This allows the larger narrative of the need for more state control to remain intact, with the consequence that others, in this case kebab restaurants, are constructed as more suitable targets for governmental action. From this perspective, the quote is also illustrative of the ways the discourse on work-related crime relies on a certain distinction in which social conflicts can arise once central actors seek to fill them with content, meaning and practices. While seldom stated explicitly, there is an underlying subtext in many of the news stories implying that immigrants are at higher risk, and as such more in need of supervisory control than Norwegians.

Work-related crime as a threat against the welfare state

In the fourth category of problem representations, we find quotes and media stories that depict work-related crime as an existential threat to the future of the welfare state and liberal democracy, with consequences for future generations. Emphasis is placed on the draining of tax revenue, misuse of public services and claims that work-related crime constitutes "a robbery of the community" (see e.g. Johansen and Gabrielsen, 2018, 3 Jul), but arguments also include rhetorical questions about what type of society we will leave for our children (Thorenfeldt, 2014, 17 Sep). Consequently, the battle against work-related crime is framed as a collective endeavour while the overarching goal is to safeguard existing economic structures and the tax model upon which the welfare state relies. This perspective can be exemplified through statements by officials like the following:

Vulnerable foreign workers are not the only victims of work-related crime. Criminals are exploiting the welfare system to make themselves richer, and huge societal values are taken from the community. Those who speculate in going bankrupt leave their employees penniless when all the assets have been transferred to other companies and the business goes bankrupt. That is when society through the Wage Guarantee Fund pays these employees' wages with our tax money. We see the same thing when criminals do not pay their taxes or when criminals receive social benefits while doing undeclared work. This is our society's money, and it is our job to look after this money. A job we take very seriously. (Moholt, 2021, 21 Dec)

Furthermore, many news stories convey a moral message, suggesting that welfare fraud, violations of tax regulations and buying so-called 'black market services' contribute to

the undermining of the nation. Likewise, by becoming more conscious and responsible consumers, Norwegian citizens can move themselves from the status of passive victims to citizens actively engaging in the collective effort to protect the future of the nation – by paying tax. It is known that the task forces against work-related crime target media strategically as part of their crime prevention strategies (see The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority et al., 2021, p. 16; Sunde et al., 2022). While this study does not include any systematic evidence of its effect, this might explain the prominence of policing perspectives and emphasis on the responsibility of citizens and their role in crime prevention.

While news media are problem-oriented in their nature, the media discourse about work-related crime seems particularly ridden by dysphemism, associating work-related crime with crisis and disaster. Seen as a threat to the welfare state and liberal democracies, the phenomenon sometimes seems to take an almost apocalyptic character. This becomes most evident in media coverage that simultaneously uses images such as ‘mafia-like organisations’, ‘taking over’ and ‘infiltrating’ while a ‘wave of work-related crime washes across the country’, as this depicts Norway as a type of trust-based free haven in a world ridden by crime and corruption. This finding resonates with Stenvoll’s media analysis, in which he argues that there is a discursive tradition in Norway of positing foreigners as more susceptible to crime and Norway as a “tranquil oasis in a world of violence, disease and poverty.” (Stenvoll, 2002, p 157). The metaphorical description of the Norwegian labour market as a “honeypot” (see e.g. Helsingeng, 2014, 12 Feb) for criminals wanting to profit from the strong Norwegian economy and the naïveté of Norwegian citizens also illustrates this point.

Discussion

Bacchi (2009) contends that WPR analyses should include an examination of the effects of specific problem representations and consider what is left unproblematic and silenced in a particular problem representation. While the increased focus on work-related crime indicates an ongoing effort to extend the arsenal of available interventions against labour exploitation, there is also a strong tendency to focus on fiscal and economic effects of labour migration, in which the overall aim is to protect Norwegian society against what is framed as a new type of threat. While work-related crime is commonly framed as a form of economic crime, its discourse breaks with traditional understandings of such crimes as a ‘victimless’. Not only is it framed as a crime against the state in the form of tax and welfare benefit fraud, it also places future generations of Norwegian citizens and law abiding business owners in the category of victimhood.

The broad portrayal of victimhood serves to marginalise migrant workers within the discourse, diverting attention away from migrant workers’ rights issues and the capitalist logic that underpins the migrant labour regime. To the extent that their situation is reported on, their representation seems bound by the binary logic as either as criminals and co-conspirators, or victims of crimes. As shown, identity controls of migrant workers are presented as legitimate in reference to migrant workers’ vulnerability for exploitation, and seldom question why identity and immigration control constitute central elements of policing practices in this area (see e.g. The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, 2019; Jahnsen & Rykkja, 2020). Cultural differences and a lack of language skills and knowledge about Norwegian society are not only presented as problems for migrant workers, but for the entire Norwegian working life model, as these factors increase the risk of workers accepting lesser working conditions. While such portrayals might be well intended, they also tend to silence the complex context in which migrant workers who work irregularly and/or are exploited, in which state regulations and restrictive immigration policies play a

significant part (LeBaron & Phillips, 2019; Lewis et al., 2015; O'Connell Davidson, 2013, 2016; Spanger, 2023).

When coupled with negative discourses on crime, migrant workers appear as non-ideal victims (Christie, 1986), and invoke the notion of 'immigrant criminality', in line with what has been termed 'the figure of the crimmigrant other' (Franko, 2019). By constructing migrant workers as not simply in need of labour rights and protection, but as potential rule breakers and offenders, the discourse on work-related crime thus serves to connect the issue of labour exploitation with deep-seated historical and cultural assumptions about 'deserving and underserving' recipients of welfare and protection, but also dominant European discourses on migration, in which irregular migration in particular is viewed as a security concern that must be stopped. This resonates with critical literature on migration and human trafficking, which has critiqued the focus on organised crime and extreme cases for creating a distinction between deserving/legitimate/ideal victims on one hand, and illegal/undeserving and criminal migrants on the other (see e.g. Chapkis, 2003; Bendixsen, 2020; Karlsen, 2021; O'Connell Davidson, 2010; Plambeck, 2014; Ticktin, 2011). Thus, the discourse on work-related crime appears to reinforce, rather than question, prevailing perceptions of the state as a neutral or benevolent entity that 'rescues' 'vulnerable' migrant workers. In this context, humanitarian relief systems for trafficking victims are intricately linked to efforts aimed at both maintaining and expanding state authority in response to unwelcome and irregular immigration and labour practices. These dual objectives result in a system where access to labour rights and protection from exploitation seem guarded by the nation state, rather than through unionisation, and the creation of specific distinctions between workers who hold rights recognised by the state, and those who do not.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined how labour exploitation is represented in the Norwegian public discourse, by studying media discourse. The article describes how 'social dumping' and 'human trafficking' developed as dominant discourses about labour exploitation during the 2000s, and that these have converged with the introduction of the newer concept of 'work-related crime', which emerged as a topical issue at a time of heightened public interest and political debate around 2013–2015. Together, these discourses can be seen as policy areas where the state straddles the dual concern of protecting national labour markets and responding to sector-specific demands for cheap and flexible labour, while also providing protection of migrant workers in accordance with international treaties and political demands from labour unions. While the discourse on social dumping tends to centre around the distinction between 'serious' and 'unserious' business owners, work-related crime centres around the distinction between 'criminals' and 'victims', and as such operates with a more legalistic and narrow distinction. The identified shift in rhetoric not only signals a changed view of what characterises crime, offenders, and risks in the labour market, but also who is considered legitimate targets of control and what is considered appropriate means of action. Thus, while former labour market policies tended to focus on trust-based forms of regulation and administrative measures such as information and guidance, recent media discourse resonates a call for strengthening the punitive capacities of the state, in which policing plays a more significant role. This could be interpreted as the outcome of a successful effort to connect workers' rights issues to a broader context of criminal justice and national threats. However, the analysis also shows that the broad

portrayal of victimhood appears to marginalise migrant workers within the discourse of work-related crime. There is a danger that this obstructs our understanding of who qualifies as potential victims and perpetrators, but also of how the effort against work-related crime can empower migrant workers.

As mentioned earlier, work-related crime is frequently referred to as a ‘wicked issue’ in policy documents, as a precursor for coordination and the need to establish multi-agency responses. While this label has not been found in media discourse, the need and urgency for a new type of policy regime is. It should be noted that both policy documents and media discourse appear devoid of the acknowledgement that the label ‘wicked issue’ is typically also used for policy problems associated with ideological conflicts and/or high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity in terms of central definitions, values, and goals (Head, 2018). A central question for future empirical examination is thus whether the use of this label, together with the broad and encompassing discourse of work-related crime, not only serves to consolidate across organisational and political divides, but also gloss over central disagreements relating to immigration and labour policies, while continuing to leave certain groups at the margins of public care and attention.

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Notes

1. This implies that some of the ideas presented here have previously been published in Norwegian, in an article that explores linguistic changes in policy and media texts and compares the coexistence of terms and definitions within the work-related crime discourse in the period between 2010 and 2021 (see Jahnsen et al., 2022). This article contains somewhat similar categories of media discourse, and thus also short segments of similar text and examples from media coverage.
2. For more detailed information about Retriever Atekst and its sources see <https://www.retrievergroup.com/>
3. The data can be described as heterogeneous, as it ranges from larger national editorial outlets to non-editorial outlets for smaller audiences, journals and local newspapers, TV and radio. I have not weighted the substantive reach and relevance of all sources. While recognising this as an important limitation, I do consider my approach to be suitable in terms of providing a broad analysis over larger developments over time, and provide context for the qualitative analysis.
4. The search strings are: 1) ‘sosial dumping’ (social dumping); 2) ‘menneskehandel’ (human trafficking); and 3) ‘arbeidslivskriminalitet’ or ‘arbeidsmarkedskriminalitet’ or ‘arbeidsmiljøkriminalitet’ or ‘arbeidskriminalitet’ (work life crime or labour market crime or work environment crime or work crime).
5. For the purpose of this article, I use a search string that covers all variations of work-related crime, with the exemption of a-krim. When measured together, it is possible to observe when the discourse entered the public media, and how it grows. Before 2013, there is only a small number of relevant news items, of which most refer to ‘labour environment crime’, which constitutes a much narrower understanding of breaches of work environment and safety regulation (Riksadvokaten 2016), but which sometimes also is used as a synonym for work-related crime (Jahnsen et al., 2022).
6. Intros: (Arbeidslivskriminalitet* OR arbeidsmarkedskriminalitet* OR arbeidsmiljøkriminalitet* OR arbeidskriminalitet* OR ‘a-krim*’ OR ‘akrim*’) OR headlines: (Arbeidslivskriminalitet* OR arbeidsmarkedskriminalitet* OR arbeidsmiljøkriminalitet* OR arbeidskriminalitet* OR ‘a-krim*’ OR ‘akrim*’) AND wc:>200.
7. All translations from Norwegian have been done by the author unless otherwise stated.

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