A Multiple Systems Estimation of presumed victims of human trafficking in the Netherlands during 2016-2019[1]

Summary

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[1] Original title in Dutch: Multiple Systems Estimation Slachtoffers Mensenhandel Nederland 2016-2019

Executive summary

A Multiple Systems Estimation of presumed victims of human trafficking in the Netherlands during 2016-2019

Introduction
Building on a previous study covering the period of 2010 up to 2015, a Multiple Systems Estimation was made of the number of presumed victims of human trafficking in the Netherlands using a national dataset of observed cases over the years 2016-2019. The dataset is maintained by a dedicated NGO (CoMensha, formerly La Strada Netherlands) receiving cases from a broad range of public and private institutions.
In the present study we have looked in some detail at CoMensha's dataset to ascertain whether it complies with basic requirements for MSE. To this end we have interviewed the data manager of CoMensha and officials responsible for the transfer of data from the six largest data providers, i.e. the National Police, the Border Police, the Social and Labour Inspectorate, institutions coordinating local victim care, care and service providers and FairWork (a NGO catering to the needs of exploited migrant workers/victims of forced labour).

Data handling and analytic strategy
Our analysis shows that the dataset, as required for MSE, relates to a closed pool of persons whose exploitation has been observed in the course of a year by one or more of several independently operating institutions. We have also ascertained that CoMensha's data manager ensures that cases are correctly matched across the lists using unique identifiers. Also, the availability of six major lists allows the modelling of possible interactions between lists, e.g. between law enforcement and care or service providers. In addition, the available information on important covariates like age, sex, nationality and type of exploitation (sexual/non-sexual) allows to capture heterogeneity of inclusion probabilities by category.

During the interviews we learned that key data providers do not strictly apply the official list of signals/operational indicators established by the Ministry of Justice and Security and CoMensha. Instead they use lists of signals tailored to their respective core businesses, for example, the police focussing on the chance of successfully investigating a case of human trafficking, and care providers paying special attention to medical and psychological symptoms of exploitation among victims. By and large all data providers apply the official definitions of human trafficking nevertheless. However, among some respondents' doubts existed about the operational definition of the newly emerging phenomenon of 'exploitation-in-criminality', e.g. in shoplifting or drugs dealing. Our conclusion overall is that the dataset meets the key requirements for applying MSE and allows an estimation of the total volume of presumed victims of human trafficking according to the official legal and operational definitions prevailing in the Netherlands at the time.

In the course of 2018 major problems have surfaced with the supply of personalised data from private institutions to CoMensha due to an (unduly strict) interpretation of the newly introduced data protection regulations of the EU, the GDPR. Several care providers and other private institutions have discontinued their supply of data on individual cases and have supplied aggregated data with marginal frequencies on covariates instead. Since these aggregated data cannot be used to analyse the distribution of cases over the lists and covariates, they are unfit for MSE. In order to remedy this situation, we have generated a completed dataset for 2018 and 2019 through imputation of the private sector cases reflecting

their distributions in previous years on other registers and covariates. Through imputation we have generated 25 possible, complete datasets. The estimated true numbers of presumed trafficking victims are based on the averaged results of 25 loglinear models with 2-factor and 25 with 3-factors interactions (an average of 50 estimates altogether).

Figure 1 sums up the estimation procedure implemented in our study including the calculation of the variance through bootstrapping.

Figure 1 *Schematic depiction of estimation procedure*
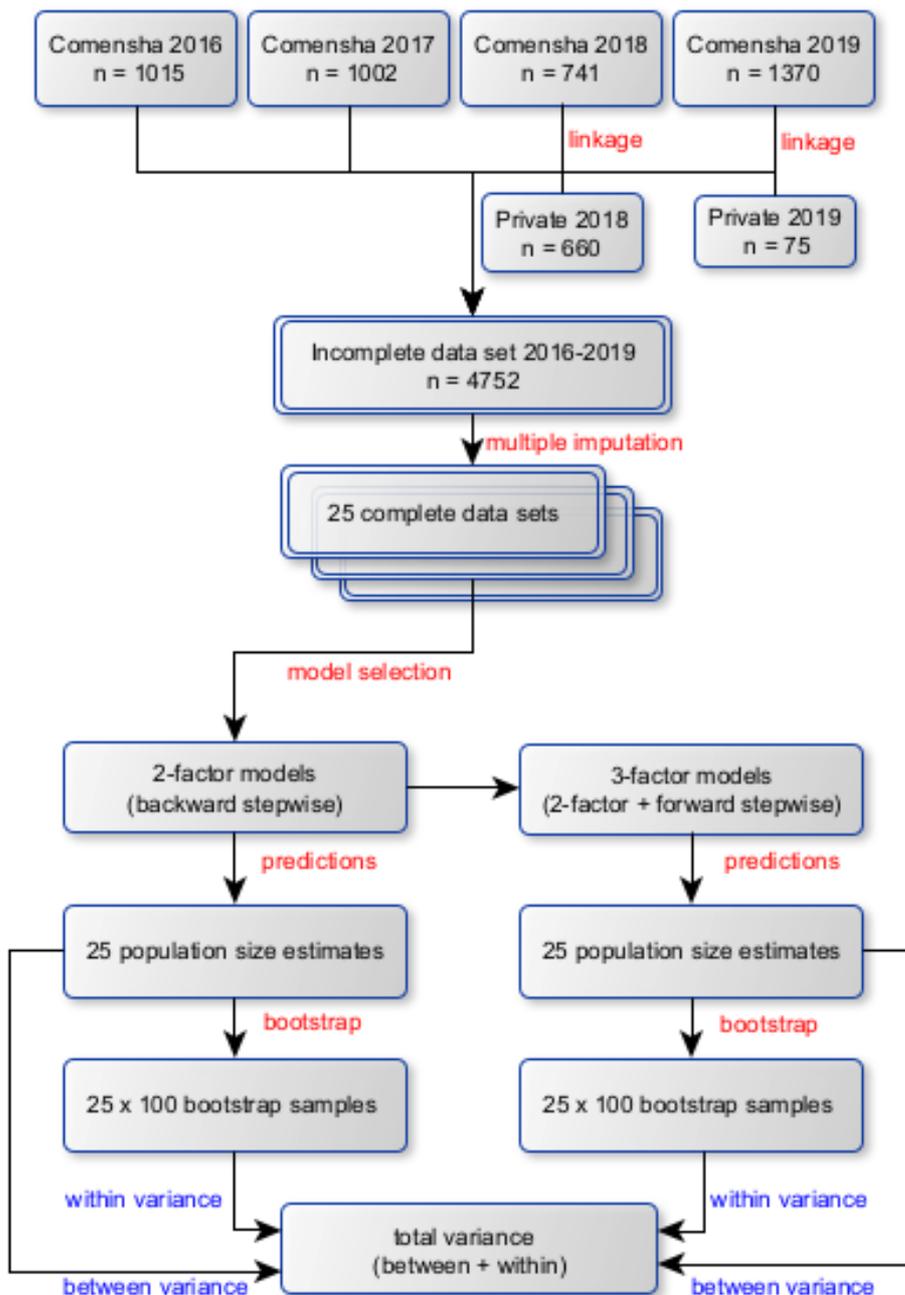
Results

Since the analysis of the new data largely follows the methodology of the previous study and applies exactly the same six registers and covariates, we have combined the results into a time series over ten full years (2010-2019). Figure 2 presents the numbers of observed and estimated presumed victims of human trafficking in The Netherlands over this period.

Figure 2 *Observed and estimated presumed victims of human trafficking in the Netherlands*
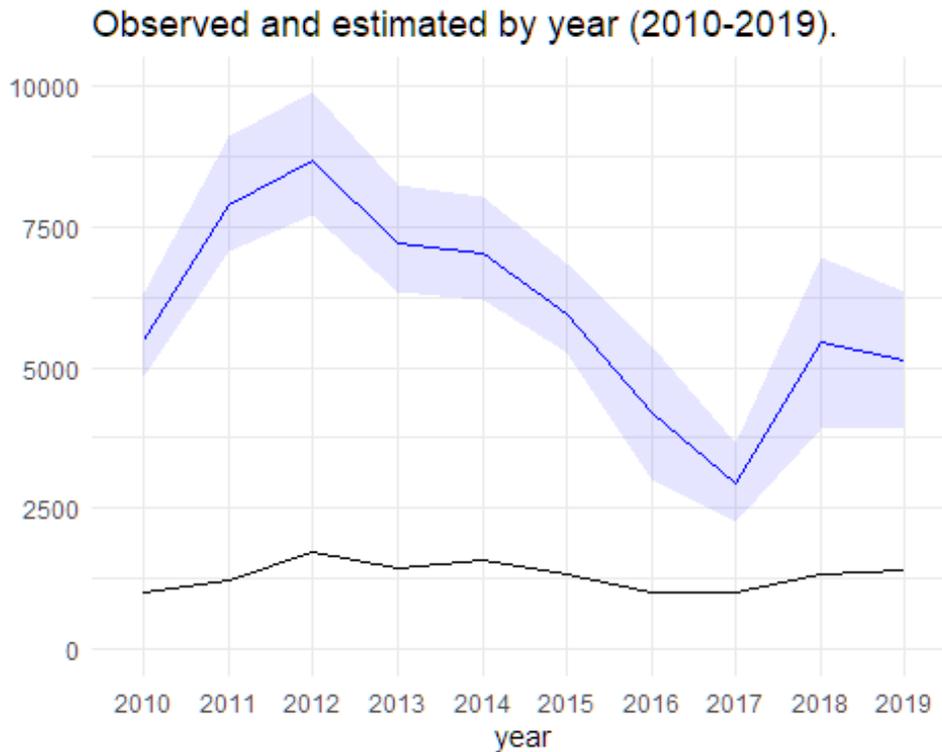

Figure 2 shows, first of all, at the bottom the ten years trend in observed cases in black. This trend, which includes imputed data over 2018 and 2019, shows a peak in 2012 with around 1.500 cases, and a steady decline between 2012 and 2017. In 2018 and 2019 the data have moved somewhat upwards again.

The trend in estimated cases (in blue, with margins of error shaded) largely mirrors the one of observed cases but shows a much more pronounced dip in 2017. This dip seems to be caused by a sudden fall in the numbers of cases exclusively detected by the National Police. In 2019 the total number of estimated presumed victims was back at the level in 2010 (at around 5.000).

Closer analysis reveals that the fall in estimated cases since 2012 is mainly due to the smaller numbers of presumed victims of sexual exploitation. Over the ten-year period, estimated numbers of presumed victims of sexual exploitation have peaked around 2012 and 2013, with 6.580 and 5.730 cases respectively. Over the past four years these numbers have fallen to an average of 2.000. A possible cause of the sustained fall in cases of sexual exploitation is a decision of the High Court of 2016 ruling that convictions for cross-border trafficking for sexual exploitation of non-nationals require proof of coercion in line with the Palermo protocol.

To some extent this fall in cases of sexual exploitation has been offset by increases in the numbers of cases concerning forced labour, most notably in 2018 and 2019. As a result, the composition of the total of presumed victims has changed, with victims of sexual and non-sexual exploitation now making up similar parts of the total. Proportions of female and male victims have also become almost equal.

Estimated numbers of presumed victims are 3 to 4 times higher than observed ones. In the final two years the estimates amounted to around 5.000 victims of which 1.300 were observed by one or more institution. Similar ratio's between observed and estimated victims

have been detected in the previous study on Dutch data, and in MSE studies conducted in other destination countries of human trafficking, including the UK, USA and Australia (Durgana & Van Dijk, 2021).

An important bonus of an MSE-study using covariates is that estimates can be made of various categories of human trafficking. In addition, ratios between observed and estimated cases can be calculated per category of victims separately. Findings of such studies can reveal the relative visibility of different types of exploitation for the involved institutions combined. Our findings point at lower visibility of cases involving minors and of cases of forced labour, most notably of Dutch nationals. In the Netherlands these types of exploitation appear to be the most hidden. Possible explanations are lack of awareness of signs of human trafficking among staff at youth institutions and the absence of NGO's focussing on forced labour among Dutch nationals.

Discussion and recommendations
The findings of the study have confirmed the utility of the CoMensha dataset for monitoring the prevalence and changing nature of human trafficking in the Netherlands through MSE. A prerequisite for repeated MSE studies in the future is the continued or resumed supply of personalised data by private institutions to CoMensha. To ensure such supply the government is advised to put the exchange of such data on a stronger legal footing as is the case in many EU Member States, and to include it in funding arrangements.
With regard to governmental policies to address human trafficking, the authors recommend concerted action to reduce the proven dark numbers of human trafficking with a special focus on the exploitation of minors by sexual exploitation and of Dutch nationals by labour exploitation.