Algorithmic Exploitation in Social Media Human Trafficking and Strategies for Regulation

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Abstract: Human trafficking thrives in the shadows, and the rise of social media has provided traffickers with a powerful and unregulated tool. This paper delves into how these criminals exploit online platforms to target and manipulate vulnerable populations. A thematic analysis of existing research explores the tactics used by traffickers on social media, revealing how algorithms can be manipulated to facilitate exploitation. Furthermore, the paper examines the limitations of current regulations in tackling this online threat. The research underscores the urgent need for collaboration between governments and researchers to combat algorithmic exploitation. By harnessing data analysis and machine learning, proactive strategies can be developed to disrupt trafficking networks and protect those most at risk.

Keywords: human trafficking; social media; legal regulation; exploitation; algorithms

1. Background

1.1. Human Trafficking: The Growing Social Concern

Human trafficking has evolved into a public safety issue of unprecedented scale. The problem has been recognized as globally pervasive, as human trafficking is a criminal enterprise that, according to somewhat modest estimates, generates over USD 150 billion annually (Toney-Butler et al. 2023). Besides being an illegal activity that has proliferated recently due to the apparent simplification of identifying and tracking down potential victims, human trafficking affects people across different demographic and ethnic groups, leading to grave health outcomes for those affected (Sweileh 2018; Klabbers et al. 2023). Admittedly, women and children comprise a disproportionately large percentage of the victimized population, totaling a whopping 70% (Toney-Butler et al. 2023). According to the statistical estimates regarding the general number of underage victims of human trafficking, the number exceeds the mark of 150 million (International Labour Organization n.d.). The unprecedented increase in crime rates in the discussed realm of illicit activities underscores the potential presence of favorable conditions that either conceal the bloom of human trafficking or make the crimes easier to execute.

As a crime of exploitation, human trafficking abuses fundamental human rights, sabotages national and global security, preys on a particularly vulnerable population stratum, questions the potency of the rule of law, and deteriorates the well-being of entire communities. The classification of the discussed crime is crucial for elucidating the peculiarities of illegal pathways that have been paved to pursue human exploitation. According to the UN protocol for human trafficking, the latter is defined as follows:

Shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons employing the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2004, p. 42).

Hence, human trafficking can be considered an umbrella term for an array of criminal activities that threaten an individual’s right to free movement and independence in a variety of contexts.
Some of the methods used to lure victims into the hard-to-escape net of human exploitation include the use of physical/psychological force, violence, manipulation, false promises of financially advantageous employment opportunities, and romantic relationships (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2022). The two primary categories of crimes stemming from human trafficking are forced labor and sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State n.d.). Both clusters affect victims across diverse age and socio-economic groups. Admittedly, several factors, including emotional vulnerability, financial strain, insufficient social safety, exposure to natural disasters, and residency in areas of political instability, exacerbate the hazards of human trafficking and make individuals even more susceptible to becoming the targets of illicit activities.

1.2. Social Media Platforms and Their Evolving Potency

Social media networks have evolved into powerful tools with considerable and increasing influence over the global population. They have evolved into indispensable means for communication, social connection, and information dissemination that have been primarily abused to facilitate trafficking in persons (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2020). Due to their accessibility and numerous benefits, social media platforms have already profoundly recrafted how people interact. The particular appeal of the discussed networks pertains to their capacity to create virtual communities where individuals from diverse backgrounds communicate. However, such immense connectivity entails inherent risks, as social media has simplified the execution of illicit activities that thrive in the shadows of online anonymity and accessibility.

As of January of this year, the total global number of social media users reached an unprecedented 5 billion. The given statistical data correlate with over 60% of the population (Data Reportal 2024). The constant emergence of new mobile applications and social media platforms and the restrictions imposed on social interactions during the pandemic have endorsed the proliferation of virtual communication over the last few years. In 2023 alone, 266 million newcomers joined social media platforms of various types. The influx of new social media users represents an annual increase of over 5%. Admittedly, the inclining trend has accelerated even more over the last quarter of 2023. The analyzed statistical data suggest that the proliferation of social media has not yet plateaued and is expected to illustrate ascending tendencies in the near future.

1.3. Intersection of Human Trafficking and Social Media

As highlighted above, social media platforms have evolved into powerful means of communication that do not know borders. Hence, social networks can easily be operated as communication channels to facilitate clandestine communication. The latter is a prerequisite for coordinating illicit activities among nefarious actors. These platforms provide secrecy that enables criminal enterprises to operate with relative immunity using encrypted messaging apps, private groups, and, in some cases, coded language. In the context of human trafficking, offenders exploit the enumerated features to recruit, coordinate, and exploit vulnerable individuals (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2020). Given the potential anonymity and undeniable accessibility of modern means of virtual communication, social media tools help criminals evade law enforcement.

The abundance of personal data willingly shared by users on social media presents a goldmine for traffickers. Criminals can access information about individuals’ habits and preferences without a significant effort. The concept of privacy has long been blurred by social media, which encourages users to share every aspect of their lives with the surrounding environment. Such a climate of neglected privacy enables traffickers to tailor their approaches and manipulate victims with the utmost efficacy. It is also worth emphasizing that the borderless nature of social media hinders the efforts to combat illicit activities. Traffickers can efficiently operate across multiple countries, exploiting differences in legal frameworks and law enforcement capabilities to evade legal prosecution.
The ways social media can be exploited to accommodate the illicit activities executed by the traffickers are not limited to communication and evasion of legal prosecution. As highlighted above, social media offers opportunities for instantaneous information sharing and (almost) unrestricted data accessibility. Hence, criminals might utilize various virtual platforms to intimidate their targets, stimulate the circulation of destructive stories, spread private images, and stalk a target’s account to gather the information that might later operate to threaten their victim. Social media can thus be used as a means to identify the target, threaten them, and lure them into the net of human trafficking.

1.4. Concept of Algorithmic Exploitation

As highlighted above, social media can streamline the identification of potential victims. Virtual communication platforms have been embedded with multiple sophisticated algorithms to personalize the recommended content and enhance the user experience (Bucher 2017). As with any advancement initially developed for a specific intention of apparently positive character (Taylor and Choi 2022), the algorithmic underpinnings of social media might be abused to aid illicit activities. In the broadest sense, the primary objective of social media algorithms is to tailor content recommendations based on the analysis of users’ interactions with information online. Such algorithms can be easily manipulated to identify potential victims. From tailoring messages to alarming advertisements, social media algorithms exploit targets’ vulnerabilities and coerce potential victims into dangerous situations.

1.5. Research on Algorithmic Exploitation in Facilitating Illegal Activities

A closer look at the structure of social media platforms suggests several themes in which algorithmic exploitation might facilitate illegal activities. As pinpointed above, these include targeted advertisements, the provision of personalized context, data mining, and profiling. Traffickers might exploit social media targeting algorithms to create ads or sponsored content tailored to individuals who are vulnerable to exploitation. For example, criminals might target individuals who have expressed interest in seeking professional support for domestic abuse. Social media algorithms curate users’ news feeds based on their past interactions, preferences, and online behavior. Traffickers could exploit such personalization features to present content that resonates with potential victims. Potential tactics could be appealing job offers, promises of financial assistance, or opportunities for romantic partnerships. As in the case of identifying individuals seeking professional assistance from domestic abuse, traffickers might go the extra mile to offer their “support” for those in particularly vulnerable situations. In addition, with the increasing number of children having social media profiles, crimes against the young have been escalating. Taken together, the discussed factors illustrate the genuine scope of the hazard of the algorithmic exploitation of social media in the context of human trafficking.

1.6. Purpose of the Research: Research Question and Hypotheses

The purpose of the research is to examine how human traffickers use social media platforms to identify and threaten their victims. The analysis of the literature on the use of social media’s algorithmic nature to facilitate illicit activities will also help identify the gaps in the existing regulatory frameworks managing the spread of the discussed problem. Hence, the paper also seeks to investigate the effectiveness of current regulations. The primary research question can be formulated as follows: How do human traffickers use social media platforms to identify and threaten their victims?

The chief significance of the given research lies in its capacity to bridge the gap in understanding the genuine state of human trafficking’s execution with the help of social media and the most feasible solutions policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and human rights advocacy groups can apply to resolve the issue at its initial stages. A proper understanding of the mechanisms through which social media platforms facilitate human
trafficking is crucial for devising targeted interventions and effective regulations. The paper has been guided by four interconnected hypotheses, which are listed below.

- **Hypothesis 1**: The accessibility to set up specific algorithms for content selection/recommendation in social media platforms provides human traffickers with favorable conditions to quickly identify and threaten potential victims.
- **Hypothesis 2**: The accessibility of personal data willingly/unwillingly shared by social media users creates unprecedented opportunities for traffickers to manipulate at-risk population strata.
- **Hypothesis 3**: Algorithmic exploitation can be achieved through targeted advertisements and personalized content.
- **Hypothesis 4**: Such techniques as data mining can be leveraged to analyze current tendencies in human trafficking and devise more relevant regulative frameworks.
- **Hypothesis 5**: Current regulatory frameworks are insufficient in addressing algorithmic exploitation in human trafficking.

2. **Design and Methods**

The preliminary outline of the concept of algorithmic exploitation in facilitating human trafficking underscored the complex nature of the problem at hand. The proliferation of social media platforms has enabled criminals to easily prey on their targets, further supported by the considerable anonymity such virtual interactions provide. This facet of human trafficking illustrates the apparent need for performing qualitative analysis to uncover predominant behavioral patterns and communicative strategies traffickers employ to lure their potential victims. The research builds upon the methodological basis of a thematic literature review. The presented research employs a thematic literature review approach to synthesize existing research on the intersection of human trafficking and social media exploitation. It identifies key themes and patterns in the literature to comprehensively understand the topic. The following chapters represent the findings from analyzing existing research, reports, and case studies. Hence, the presented study operates under the qualitative methodological paradigm to ensure the most optimal analysis of the subject matter.

The applicability of thematic literature reviews has been considered feasible in various spheres and research contexts. According to Snyder (2019), the unprecedented knowledge accumulation rate necessitates continuous analysis. By being informed of the most recent advancements in a research area of interest, the researcher can further advance the knowledge base of that specific domain. Hence, a thematic literature review facilitates a comprehensive examination of existing research and helps gather insights from diverse sources (Aveyard and Bradbury-Jones 2019). Given the dynamic nature of human trafficking, the literature review will assist in identifying the underlying themes and recurring patterns to broaden the current understanding of the use of virtual communication platforms for the purpose of human rights abuse. The given paper builds upon the literature review of 18 items arranged into primary themes: targeted advertisements, personalized content, and data mining. While the former two thematic constructs focus on the ways human traffickers might abuse social media platforms, the latter addresses the potential of data analytics to uncover indicators of human rights abuse.

3. **Findings**

As highlighted above, the vast part of the literature review has been focused on identifying specific patterns of algorithmic exploitation by traffickers on social media platforms. The following subchapters elucidate the literature review findings arranged according to thematic overlaps.

4. **Targeted Advertisements**

The methods employed in social media advertising have considerably reconstructed the advertising realm by offering an array of highly efficient data-based targeting tech-
Targeted advertising, also referred to as targeting, has emerged due to the proliferation of social media and the subsequent need to (1) optimize the user experience and (2) refine the advertising methodologies to cater to specific clients’ needs. While the former objective stems from the apparent need to ensure user satisfaction with the interaction with a specific platform, the latter objective might be pursued for commercial purposes (Sharma and Ashfaq 2023) and the spread of manipulative information to gain influence over the selected population strata (Hirsch et al. 2024). In addition, the use of targeting has been proven effective in performing recruitment for research participation, including clinical research studies (Mühlhoff and Willem 2023; Topolovec-Vranic and Natarajan 2016) and political sentiment analysis research (Sances 2021). Hence, the undeniable proliferation of social media networking sites in recent years has refined the algorithms applied to enhance the user experience while broadening the array of potential ways in which (and for which) such algorithms can be utilized.

Another critical factor in the given research context is the relevant ease and lack of regulation in setting up the targeting algorithms to identify a specific population group (Dell et al. 2019; Ornelas et al. 2023). These factors allow human trafficking offenders not only to recruit their potential victims but also to arrange the logistics and perform transnational criminal activities (Volodko et al. 2020). In their research on the use of advertisements targeted at migrant job-seekers, Volodko and colleagues have found that the majority of employment opportunities offered online comprised indicators of being potentially connected with labor trafficking. Such indicators referred to the scarcity of information regarding the actual wages and scope of employees’ responsibilities (Volodko et al. 2020). By employing targeted advertisements, human trafficking offenders streamline the recruitment of potential victims. This way, traffickers exploit social media algorithms to target potential victims through advertisements tailored to their vulnerabilities.

In parallel, some researchers claim that a proper understanding of targeting algorithms can be viewed as resolving human trafficking. Griné and Lopes (2023) argue that the insights offered by targeting specific social media users might be gathered to perform illicit activities, including human trafficking. However, while the scholars acknowledge the detrimental impact of abuse of social media in luring potential human trafficking victims, the researchers also pinpoint that the proper analysis of virtual communication tools and social media strategies might inform better regulative frameworks (Hadjira et al. 2023). Similarly, the double-faceted nature of social media has been recognized by Hadjira and colleagues. The researchers argue that social media can also be leveraged to educate at-risk populations about how criminals might conceal their illegal endeavors.

5. Personalized Content

The concept of personalized content correlates with the above-described phenomenon of targeted advertising. While the latter serves as the mechanism for identifying the potential victims, the former represents the next step in executing such illicit activities. Strycharz and Duivenvoorde (2021) found that the so-called personalized marketing communication (PMC) might be operated to exploit social media users’ vulnerability. In the context of human trafficking, the personalization of content based on psychological targeting holds the most critical value. Studies within psychology have demonstrated the ability to draw insights through individuals’ digital footprints, such as their social media activity (Segalin et al. 2017). Moreover, tailored communication based on the analyzed characteristics has also been considered more compelling and persuasive. For example, messages tailored to match an individual’s extroversion or introversion inclinations have yielded higher engagement and conversion rates than generic messages (Matz et al. 2017). Similarly, research has indicated that political advertisements that align with an individual’s personality traits, predicted from their written text, exhibit greater persuasiveness than non-personalized ads (Zarouali et al. 2020). Baldwin et al. (2015) also recognize the critical role of psychological coercion, which is leveraged by human traffickers, in performing intricate and highly effective algorithmic exploitation of social media platforms. Research has demonstrated
that content tailored to individuals’ characteristics is more persuasive and can increase engagement. Thus, it can be inferred that personalized content arranged based on analyzing the population’s peculiarities will likely be perceived as more persuasive.

6. Data Mining as an Analytical and Preventative Tool

A comprehensive understanding of existing patterns and tendencies in utilizing social media platforms as tools for advancing human trafficking necessitates the analysis of vast amounts of data. According to Bermeo et al. (2023), machine learning (ML) algorithms have demonstrated considerable efficacy in recognizing patterns indicative of human trafficking activities on such media. Among others, data mining is one of the most feasible approaches to scrutinizing big data. According to Belyadi and Haghighat (2020), data mining techniques encompass a variety of methods utilized for extracting specific insights from vast datasets. Ranellucci et al. (2015) note that these methods employ sophisticated analytical approaches to uncover specific patterns within extensive collections of information. Data mining helps establish connections among diverse linear and nonlinear relationships, drawing upon disciplines such as statistics, artificial intelligence, ML, database theories, and pattern recognition (Kotu and Deshpande 2015). Practitioners leverage various tools within this realm, including multivariate statistical techniques, regression methods, classification algorithms, discrimination methods, and cluster analysis. Given the abundance of approaches used in data mining, it is possible to use social media platforms as data pools with raw information, which can be scrutinized to understand the behavioral and communicative patterns represented by human traffickers.

Data mining has already proven effective in identifying the threats of illicit activities associated with human trafficking. For example, having analyzed publicly available trafficking datasets, Szakonyi et al. (2021) found that female victims comprised the vast majority of target populations of varied age groups. The analysis of yet another data source has underscored the particular vulnerability of women and children to human traffickers operating in domestic areas. Having thoroughly analyzed online classified advertisements, forums, and social networking platforms associated with escort and massage services (EMSs), Wang et al. (2015) found that clients who engage with such platforms for prostitution purposes also utilize the internet and social media to exchange experiences and provide leads to one another. Based on data analysis, the researchers proposed a prototype system designed to aid law enforcement in tackling trafficking and sexual exploitation, particularly of women and children. This system, named TrafficBot, operates by automatically gathering and correlating information from publicly available sources. Leveraging techniques such as information retrieval, integration, and natural language processing, TrafficBot constructs a comprehensive data repository. The latter can be visualized in various formats to assist law enforcement efforts.

Similarly, analyzing advertising texts shared on social platforms has also been considered helpful in elucidating potentially abusive patterns. Having scrutinized textual data sourced from Backpage.com, Alvari et al. (2017) focused on discerning whether escort advertisements could indicate potential human trafficking involvement. Initially, the researchers introduced an unsupervised filtering method to isolate data that potentially signals human trafficking activity. Subsequently, the scholars developed a semi-supervised learning model and trained it on a subset of data manually annotated by a human trafficking specialist. Employing this model, Alvari and colleagues uncovered specific patterns indicative of the threat of human trafficking. They found promising results that highlighted the efficacy of a semi-supervised learning model in spotting potential human trafficking-related ads.

7. Overview of Current Legal Regulations of Human Trafficking

The existing legal frameworks focused on the criminal activities of human trafficking overlook the facilitating role of social media in recruiting potential victims and broadening the scope of the problem. The majority of the legislation regarding the topic bears a reactive character. With the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution putting the legal end to the era of slavery and forced servitude in 1865, the following legislation has primarily followed
the pattern of addressing the consequences of breaking the law (United States Department of Justice n.d.). The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2003/2005, and the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008, among others, seek to provide governmental support for those already affected by illicit activities or refine the prosecution process to transform it to a deterrent factor. Hence, it can be inferred that existing regulatory frameworks primarily focus on addressing the consequences of human trafficking rather than preventing algorithmic exploitation on social media. For this reason, a need to strengthen regulatory frameworks and enhance collaboration between government agencies, law enforcement, and technology companies is urgently needed.

8. Discussion

8.1. Ethical Implications of Algorithmic Exploitation in Human Trafficking

The exploitation of social media in facilitating human trafficking entails considerable ethical concerns. Targeted advertisements and the abuse of personalized content enable traffickers to exploit vulnerabilities in social media algorithms and identify potential victims. Such practice infringes upon individuals’ privacy and manipulates their people’s digital experiences. As highlighted in the literature review, the borderless nature of social media platforms allows traffickers to operate across multiple jurisdictions. This kind of flexibility hinders the practical application of regulatory frameworks. The lack of supervisory mechanisms that would oversee the intention and application of targeted advertisements, content personalization, and other algorithm-based content arrangements underscores the need for ethical considerations in the design/implementation of such algorithms to prevent their abuse for illicit activities of human trafficking.

8.2. Impact on Victims

The personalized content tailored to exploit victims’ vulnerabilities can exacerbate their trauma and further perpetuate virtual victimization. Moreover, using social media algorithms to target and coerce individuals into dangerous situations undermines their capacity to use social media platforms with the ultimate freedom and a sense of autonomy over the consumed information. The described issue highlights the need for developing a comprehensive support network for victims of human trafficking and their families. In addition, the literature review illustrated that efforts to combat human trafficking must protect survivors from re-victimization.

8.3. Effectiveness of Current Regulatory Frameworks and Enforcement Mechanisms

As highlighted in the previous chapter, current regulatory frameworks aimed at addressing human trafficking overlook the role of algorithmic exploitation on social media platforms. While laws such as the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 provide legal support for victims and endorse the prosecution of traffickers, they seem to discard the evolving tactics employed by traffickers on virtual communication platforms. Furthermore, enforcement efforts face technical challenges in detecting and prosecuting perpetrators operating in online spaces, where jurisdictional boundaries are obscured and anonymity is easily maintained. From this perspective, data analytics and ML might offer invaluable insights into identifying algorithmic exploitation in its earlier stages. Hence, the need to strengthen regulatory frameworks and enhance collaboration between government agencies, law enforcement, and technology companies to tackle algorithmic exploitation in human trafficking remains of crucial value.

8.4. Data Analytics in Addressing Algorithmic Exploitation

As pinpointed in the literature review, the lack of regulation governing the peculiarities of setting up social media algorithms leaves criminals with the apparent independence to prey on their victims. For this reason, the role of comprehensive safety networks based on data mining needs to be leveraged, in particular, the launch of complex data-informed
algorithms to detect and prevent the spread of exploitative content. Such proactive measures will enhance the efficacy of law enforcement in investigating/disrupting trafficking networks operating online.

8.5. Role of Law Enforcement Agencies in Addressing Trafficking Crimes in Humans

The role of law enforcement agencies in addressing the discussed crisis should not be overlooked. Given the proliferation of trafficking in humans and the extensive exploitation of modern means of communication/technology, the scope of law enforcement agencies’ practice has been extended. They have evolved into institutions of authority responsible not only for investigating cases of human trafficking and gathering supportive evidence but also for forecasting offenders’ actions and eliminating the hazard for particularly vulnerable population strata. The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) recently pledged an open call for research studies on the correlation between human trafficking and technology (U.S. Department of Justice 2024). The second solicitation category is explicitly dedicated to the intersection of technology and trafficking. NIJ has announced it welcomes research endeavors that focus on technological resources/tools to facilitate investigations, the assessment of the unintentional outcomes of implementing such tools, and the production of implementation guides as dissemination products. Hence, the institutional calls for assistance from the research community illustrate the acknowledgment of the substantial role of technology in streamlining and exacerbating crime.

Additionally, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) are pivotal in addressing human trafficking. The enumerated departments develop and implement regulative frameworks. Specifically, within HHS, the Office on Trafficking in Persons at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) is dedicated to creating a comprehensive national framework to support survivors of various trafficking experiences. This involves strengthening current service networks, fostering collaborations, and aligning federal and community efforts.

8.6. Opportunities for Collaboration: Government, Law Enforcement Agencies, and Researchers

Collaboration between government agencies, law enforcement, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and researchers is essential for combating human trafficking. The directions for such collaborative efforts include sharing data, coordinating shared investigative endeavors, and developing evidence-based interventions and regulatory frameworks. NGOs play a crucial role in providing support services to victims, as well as advocating for policy changes to address systemic issues underlying human trafficking. Researchers contribute valuable insights into the dynamics of algorithmic exploitation and inform evidence-based approaches to prevention and intervention. Through collaboration, stakeholders would leverage their respective expertise to create a more comprehensive and well-coordinated response to algorithmic exploitation in human trafficking.

The analyzed literature review confirmed all the hypotheses suggested. In particular, the unregulated accessibility to set up content recommendations and targeted advertising on social media platforms streamlines the processes of identifying and threatening potential victims. Additionally, the research illustrated that the abundance of personal data shared online might be operated as a manipulative tool against at-risk populations. At the same time, the research illustrated the potential of data mining in detecting social media tendencies indicative of human trafficking. The insights gathered from data analysis can be harvested to address the insufficiency of current regulatory frameworks.

8.7. Limitations of the Research Paper

The primary limitation of the given research paper is its focus on a limited number of research articles included in the literature review sample. It is also worth noting that the availability of data related to human trafficking, especially concerning online activities and algorithmic exploitation, may be limited. Such a limitation restricts the depth of analysis and the ability to draw comprehensive conclusions.
9. Conclusions

Human trafficking represents a grave violation of human rights. The proliferation of social media platforms has facilitated the exploitation of vulnerable population strata. Targeted advertisements, personalized content, and data mining have emerged as critical tools in the traffickers’ arsenal, enabling them to operate with relative legal immunity. Current regulatory frameworks have struggled to address the evolving nature of human trafficking endorsed by social media. While the existing legal frameworks provide critical legal support for victims, they often overlook the role of social media algorithms in facilitating trafficking. Strengthening regulatory frameworks is paramount for developing more effective strategies to combat crime.

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