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Undocumented and At Risk: Uzbek Migrants in the Nordic Region

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POLITICS AND HISTORY IN CENTRAL ASIA

BRIDGES ACROSS BORDERS

Dynamics of Central Eurasian
Migration to Australia, Japan,
and Northern Europe

Edited by
Timur Dadabaev
Shigeto Sonoda
Kirill Nourzhanov

palgrave
macmillan

Timur Dadabaev · Shigeto Sonoda ·
Kirill Nourzhanov
Editors

Bridges Across Borders

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Undocumented and At Risk: Uzbek Migrants in the Nordic Region

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of undocumented migration¹ has become a pressing concern across Europe, in which the Nordic countries are no exception. Recently, Nordic countries have witnessed a significant increase in the number of undocumented migrants, many of whom occupy a precarious position as both potential victims of crime and potential offenders. This trend has led to increased concern in both Finland and Sweden over the issue of undocumented migrants and their involvement in criminal activities (Adamson, 2020; Brå, 2021; Hansen, 2021; Salmi et al., 2015; Skardhamar et al., 2014).

Undocumented migrants are often subject to exploitation and abuse, including human trafficking, labour exploitation, and other forms of violence (Gallagher, 2015; Ollus, 2016; Vuolajärvi, 2019; Schoutz et al., 2024). They are also at risk of being victimised by other members of their own communities or by criminals who prey upon vulnerable populations (Lee et al., 2001; Martinez & Valenzuela, 2006; Thomas, 2011). At the same time, others argue that undocumented migrants may also become involved in criminal activities themselves, as a means of survival or as a consequence of exclusion from the social security system (Butcher & Piehl, 1998; Engbersen et al., 2007; Leerkes et al., 2012).

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

¹ In this article, we use migration/immigration and migrant/immigrant interchangeably.

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

To achieve this aim, empirically, we investigate the experiences of Uzbek migrants in two Nordic countries: Finland and Sweden. As a group often vulnerable to exploitation and sometimes fraud by fellow migrants and members of other ethnic migrant communities, Uzbek migrants may turn to fraudulent activities as a means of survival or in attempts to extend their stay in a country. Theoretically, here we draw from strain theory (Agnew, 1992; Merton, 1938) to provide a nuanced and contextualised understanding of the factors contributing to Uzbek migrants' dual role as both victims and perpetrators of crime in Finland and Sweden. As strain theory argues, when individuals experience strain, such as economic deprivation, blocked opportunities, or discrimination, they may be forced to turn to criminal activities as a means of coping or adapting to their circumstances (Agnew, 1992).

The chapter is structured as follows. The next section continues with a literature review followed by a section on the theoretical framework. Then, we provide an overview of our methods, discussing data collection and interpretation strategies. In our analysis, we take a closer look at how informality and the undocumented status of migrants can push the latter to both victimisation and involvement in petty criminal activities. To conclude, we consider the broader implications of the interplay between undocumentedness, informality, and crime.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The nexus between immigration and crime has been one of the most controversial social issues for decades (Light & Miller, 2018; Stumpf, 2006). Despite some studies suggesting a positive correlation between immigration and crime rates (Adamson, 2020; Martinez & Valenzuela, 2006), most of the research conducted on this topic, both in the past and present, has indicated that, at the individual level, immigrants are not more likely to engage in criminal activity than native-born individuals (Martinez & Lee, 2000; Ousey & Kubrin, 2009; Pickering & Ham, 2015).

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

Several studies have found that undocumented migrants carry a higher risk for victimisation compared with their documented counterparts (Bucher et al., 2010; Zadnik et al., 2016). This stems from their fear of deportation, lack of legal protection, and limited access to social services. Undocumented migrants are often reluctant to report crimes given their fear of immigration authorities and border police or the risk of retribution from their perpetrators (Comino et al., 2020). Research has also demonstrated that undocumented migrants are often exploited in the workplace, with employers taking advantage of their legal vulnerability to pay lower wages, deny benefits, and subject them to dangerous working conditions (Gallagher, 2015). This can lead to situations of forced human and labour trafficking (Ollus, 2016; Vuolajärvi, 2019). Undocumented migrants may also experience violence and exploitation during their journey, including

when crossing borders and during the period of transit. Furthermore, they may be at risk of physical assault, theft, and sexual violence, and may be forced into smuggling drugs or other illicit goods (De Vries & Guild, 2019).

Decision-making amongst migrants may be driven by various factors, which could lead to engaging in certain activities including criminal behaviour. First, a lack of legal options may push migrants to engage in crime. For example, if they are unauthorised to work, they may resort to document fraud or labour law violations in attempts to earn money (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Second, migrants, especially those with an undocumented status, may experience financial strain due to their limited access to employment opportunities and social services, which may lead them to commit crimes to make ends meet (Vuolajärvi, 2019). Third, undocumented migrants may fear deportation and turn to criminal activities as a means of survival. In some cases, migrants may commit document fraud or other crimes to avoid detection by immigration authorities or in response to state border control (Horton, 2015; Kyle & Siracusa, 2005). Fourth, migrants may be pushed to commit crimes as a survival strategy in attempts to navigate legally opaque and restrictive environments (Urinboyev, 2020).

Overall, whilst the relationship between immigration and crime remains contested, it is clear that more nuanced and careful research is needed to fully understand the factors contributing to crime rates in immigrant communities.

The link between immigration and crime has recently become quite a contentious issue in the Nordic countries as well, particularly in Sweden. Some studies have described immigrants as overrepresented in crime and delinquency statistic in the Nordic countries (see, for example, Adamson, 2020; Brå, 2021; Hällsten et al., 2013; Kivivuori & Bernburg, 2011). This may stem from the fact that studies have often focused on examining migrants as a single group, resulting in a misrepresentation of the diversity and heterogeneity existing across different immigrant populations, according to Skardhamar et al. (2014). Moreover, the ‘violence of welfare bureaucracies’ in Northern Europe has also contributed to a growth in the number of crimes attributed to migrants (Abdelhady et al., 2020). Others have explained this by assuming that immigrants are often the targets of crime policy interventions justified through the ‘crimmigration’ and racialisation of non-white immigrants (Branteryd et al., 2022; Hübinette & Lundström, 2014). However, the most recent research

on youth immigrants and crime in Sweden indicates a decline in self-reported offences amongst both first- and second-generation immigrant youth (Vasiljevic et al., 2020). Yet, the victimisation and exploitation of migrants, particularly amongst those with an undocumented status, in the Nordic context have also been well-documented (see, e.g., Branteryd et al., 2022; Davies & Ollus, 2019; Ollus, 2016; Vuolajärvi, 2019). Adding to this complex landscape, undocumented migrants in Sweden live in a constant state of anxiety, stress, and fear due to their undocumented status (that is, deportability), leading to various forms of victimisation, marginalisation, and social exclusion (Sager, 2011; Wahlström, 2018). They adopt survival strategies involving maintaining anonymity, concealing their identity, and avoiding any actions that could potentially attract authorities' attention (Wahlström, 2018).

This brief literature review highlights that most previous studies primarily focused on either the victimisation experienced by undocumented migrants or their potential involvement in criminal activities. Very few studies, however, discussed how undocumented migrants experience both victimisation and engagement in petty crimes. In our study, we aim to offer a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of the interplay between undocumentedness, victimisation, and engagement in petty crimes. In this context, we address an under-researched element of undocumented migrants as both victims and potential offenders of petty crime by exploring the case of Uzbek migrants in Finland and Sweden.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Strain theory, developed by Merton (1938), is a sociological perspective that explains the relationship between structural factors, individual strain, and the likelihood of crime. It posits that when individuals are unable to achieve their goals through legitimate means, they experience strain, which can lead to deviant behaviours such as crime. A lack of legitimate opportunities and access to resources creates a sense of strain, potentially leading individuals to engage in criminal acts (Agnew, 1992). Merton's work on strain theory has been widely influential in the field of criminology, expanded upon by many other theorists. For example, Agnew (1992) developed a general strain theory, which expanded the original theory to include additional types of strain, such as negative emotions and dispositions, as well as the role of individual coping strategies in response to a strain. The theory posits that criminogenic strains can lead to a desire

to cope illegally, which, in turn, can weaken social control and lead to increased criminal behaviour (Agnew, 1992).

Strain theory suggests that people may resort to crime to cope with or escape from the pressures and negative emotions caused by stressful situations. These strains could include chronic unemployment, financial difficulties, or personal grievances. Different versions of strain theory aim to identify the types of strains most likely to result in criminal behaviour, explain why strains may lead to crime, and explore the factors influencing a person's decision to respond to strain with criminal activity. For example, an individual continuously experiencing unemployment may engage in criminal behaviour, such as theft or drug dealing, to obtain money or relieve their negative emotions (Agnew, 2014).

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

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research relies on qualitative methodologies. Between March and December 2022 and during the autumn of 2024, several week-long field studies were conducted in Stockholm amongst Uzbek migrant workers. Additionally, throughout 2024, we conducted fieldwork in the greater Helsinki area, focusing on Uzbek migrants in Finland. The ethnographic material was collected through observations, which involved immersion

into the social world of the participants and observing their behaviours, interactions, and practices in their natural settings (Baker, 2006). Observations took place at various events held by the Uzbek community (including Uzbek national celebrations and fundraising events), on-site meetings with the consuls of Uzbekistan, and in mosques, money transfer offices, and cafés, and at small social gatherings of Uzbek migrants in their living places. In these instances, we observed their daily lives, took part in social interactions, and listened to their experiences of undocumented-ness, exploitation, and crime, as well as their strategies for navigating these precarious conditions. Our language skills in Uzbek facilitated engagement in their conversations and participation in collective dialogues with migrants from Uzbekistan.

Alongside our participant observations, we conducted semi-structured interviews with about 20 migrants, during which participants shared their experiences, perspectives, and attitudes towards their migration journeys, legal status, and labour market integration. We also conducted interviews with official translators (between Uzbeks and Finnish/Swedish authorities), immigration lawyers, individuals assisting with the regularisation of migrants (referred to as document facilitators), and semi-official leaders of the Uzbek communities in both countries. The insights we gathered from the interviews with various stakeholders allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the sociocultural, legal, and bureaucratic dimensions influencing the lives of migrants, allowing us to better understand the dynamics at play within the Uzbek migrant communities in the two Nordic countries. Whilst using a set of pre-determined questions, we also resorted to flexibility and follow-up questions based on the participants' responses. We were particularly interested in understanding the daily experiences of Uzbek migrants, including their challenges related to informality, labour exploitation, and integration into the labour market, as well as their coping mechanisms and strategies for navigating their precarious conditions. To ensure the ethical integrity of the research, we obtained informed consent from each respondent, ensuring they were fully apprised of the study's objectives, the potential ramifications of their participation, and any anticipated benefits. When citing an interview (translated verbatim), we use pseudonyms to protect the identity of our research participants.

Moreover, we conducted a digital ethnography via social media to complement in-person fieldwork. This method is particularly useful for

studying difficult-to-reach populations or communities, such as undocumented migrants, since it allows for nonintrusive, remote access to their everyday lives, practices, and experiences (Pink et al., 2015). Since Telegram is the most popular messaging and social media platform in Uzbekistan, it also serves as the primary communications channel and source of information for Uzbeks living abroad. There are several Telegram channels and groups that specialise in different European countries, including Finland and Sweden. Special attention was granted to designated Telegram groups with thousands of members where Uzbeks in both countries seek or advertise opportunities for regularisation, employment, and accommodation, as well as share their migration experiences and seek redress against fraud and exploitation. Following these and other digital platforms provided insights into how migrants navigate interactions with local authorities, employers, and community networks. Ethical and privacy considerations were carefully maintained, with a critical awareness of the limitations and biases of collecting and analysing digital data.

This combination of ethnographic observations, digital ethnography, and interviews facilitated a more complete and in-depth understanding of the complex dynamics at play amongst undocumented Uzbek migrants in Finland and Sweden. Across field sites, we met or interacted with up to 100 Uzbek migrants. Their testimonies and experiences provided valuable insights into the challenges of integration, access to labour markets, and the structural conditions shaping their adaptation strategies.

EXPLORING THE NEXUS BETWEEN UNDOCUMENTEDNESS, INFORMALITY, AND CRIME

Establishing the Context: Uzbek Migrants in Finland and Sweden

Uzbekistan, with a population of 36 million, is the most densely populated country in Central Asia. High unemployment rates, low salaries, and economic hardships have prompted millions of Uzbeks to migrate abroad. Whilst the majority travel to visa-free countries such as Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, and Türkiye, a notable increase in migration to the Gulf States, Japan, the Schengen zone, South Korea, and the United States has occurred in recent years. Despite high bureaucratic barriers and costly visa procedures, many Uzbeks pursue migration opportunities in these higher-income countries.

The Nordic countries, particularly Finland and Sweden, have become increasingly attractive destinations for Uzbek migrants. However, the absence of Finnish or Swedish embassies in Uzbekistan compels many migrants to apply for visas in other Schengen countries, such as the Baltic states and Poland. Some Uzbeks obtain work, education, or tourism visas in these countries before relocating to Western and Northern Europe in search of better economic opportunities.

The Uzbek community in Sweden is relatively new and small albeit growing rapidly and notable for its high proportion of undocumented migrants. Officially, there are more than 6000 individuals originating from Uzbekistan living in Sweden (SCB, 2025), although the number of undocumented Uzbeks in the country is believed to lie between 15,000 and 20,000 (Eraliev, 2023). The fact that the number of Uzbek asylum applicants in Sweden and the share of rejected applications remain quite high (Migrationsverket, 2024) indicates that many applicants are in reality economic migrants seeking legal ways to reside in Sweden.

In Finland, the Uzbek migrant population is smaller yet also growing, with approximately 2500 individuals residing in the country. Unlike Sweden, a significant portion of Uzbek migrants in Finland arrive through work and education visas, limiting the number of undocumented migrants. However, instances of fraudulent recruitment have emerged, particularly in the construction sector, leading to deportations and legal challenges (Yle, 2019).

Many Uzbek migrants in Helsinki and Stockholm live in shared rented apartments due to financial constraints or, in Sweden's case, an undocumented status limiting formal rental opportunities. Shared housing reduces living costs, and even documented migrants often opt for such arrangements. Undocumented migrants also fear that seeking medical care or assistance from social welfare programmes might jeopardise their presence in the country and lead to negative repercussions (Jönsson, 2014; Lundberg & Spång, 2017). In Sweden, a controversial proposal for a duty to report has sparked heated debates regarding the rights of migrants (Ahlén & Gschwind, 2024). In both countries, Uzbek migrants frequently work in the construction, cleaning, and food services industries, where they may experience exploitative working conditions, low wages, and job insecurity. In some cases, employers provide accommodation, further increasing migrants' dependence and vulnerability.

A thriving industry of document facilitators assists Uzbeks in securing visas, residence permits, work contracts, and other legal documents.

These facilitators operate in the sending (Uzbekistan), transit (Türkiye and, until 2022, Russian Federation), and recipient (Europe) destinations. Facilitated irregular migration has become a persistent issue, with Eastern European countries acting as key transit hubs for irregular migration to Western Europe (Pullat, 2014). Reports indicate that up to two-thirds of irregular migration cases detected by European Union (EU) border authorities involve visa misuse, overstays, or unauthorised border crossings (Pullat, 2014). Uzbek migrants commonly enter Europe on short-term Schengen visas obtained in Tashkent, and subsequently attempt to transition to long-term work or residence permits through various means. Whilst Sweden has witnessed a rise in undocumented migration, Finland's work visa-based migration model offers a different dynamic, influencing the legal status and labour market integration of Uzbek migrants in the region.

Paths to Irregularity and Informality

Respondents revealed that Uzbek migrants reach Finland and Sweden via different pathways. In Sweden, two primary routes were identified. The first involves Estonian, Latvian, or Polish firms (often in the construction sector) by obtaining subcontracted work in Sweden and bringing Uzbek workers under their contracts. Due to their precarious situation, Uzbek or other non-EU (mostly coming from the former Soviet Union) workers accept significantly lower wages, rendering them an attractive labour source for firms. However, after Swedish authorities tightened the rules on posting workers in 2020 (Government of Sweden, 2020), it has become increasingly difficult for Uzbeks to 'relocate' as firm employees from neighbouring countries.

The second pathway involves Uzbeks arriving from other Schengen countries, such as the Baltic states and Poland, through informal networks. As briefly mentioned above, many prospective migrants obtain either Schengen or work permits to countries such as the Baltics, Bulgaria, Czechia, Poland, and others, and then decide to move further to western or northern European countries with higher levels of income, greater opportunities, and better living standards. Facilitators assist in bringing them to Sweden, despite increasingly tightened controls on the primary 'gateways' (such as Skavsta Airport, the Oresund Bridge, or seaports). Upon arrival to Sweden, Uzbek migrants typically have two choices: applying for asylum or seeking employment in the informal sector. By

the time they enter Sweden, they have already explored the pros and cons of both options: directly going to a person who has promised to help with a job or turning themselves into immigration authorities to seek asylum.²

In Sweden, document facilitators coach asylum seekers on crafting narratives that may increase their chances of securing residence permits. Some migrants pay fees to facilitators or fellow asylum seekers whose applications have been successful. Mock interviews and coaching on their posture, tone, and statements during asylum hearings are common. Nevertheless, most Uzbek migrants recognise that their cases will likely be denied, reflecting the broader reality of economic migration rather than asylum-seeking. For instance, the rejection rate amongst asylum seekers from Uzbekistan was one of the highest (95%) in 2023 (Asylrättscentrum, 2024). This has pushed Uzbeks to seek informal employment rather than formalising their status through asylum-seeking.

By contrast, Uzbek migration to Finland is characterised by a higher proportion of migrants arriving via formal work contracts. Finland's more regulated labour market offers fewer informal job opportunities than Sweden, pushing Uzbeks to secure employment through legitimate channels. However, the presence of workers from Baltic EU member states in the Finnish construction sector also creates indirect employment opportunities for Uzbek migrants. Whilst some Uzbeks arrive on work and education visas, fraudulent recruitment practices have also been reported, particularly in construction, where cases of document fraud and underpayment have led to deportations (Yle, 2019).

Fieldwork in Helsinki and Stockholm revealed that, whilst Sweden has a larger population of undocumented Uzbek migrants, Finland offers fewer opportunities for informal employment, reducing the number of migrants living outside the legal system. However, both countries feature Uzbek workers who rely on community networks and informal strategies within the labour market to sustain themselves.

In Sweden, a significant proportion of Uzbek migrants continue to work informally, avoiding interactions with authorities and relying on undocumented networks for jobs, housing, and financial services. Like many other undocumented migrants, they try to remain anonymous,

² It should be noted that there are people from Uzbekistan who have been granted refugee status in Sweden. However, the focus of this article remains on those Uzbek migrants who use the Swedish asylum system as a means to enter the labour market (and who do not have their asylum grounds recognised within the asylum process).

hiding their identity, and avoiding actions that could alert authorities (Sager, 2011; Wahlström, 2018). In Finland, however, whilst formal work permits dominate, this does not mean all Uzbek migrants are formally employed. We witnessed cases of informal employment amongst Uzbek migrants in Finland, although significantly fewer than in Sweden. Despite Finland's more structured migration policies and labour market regulations, some migrants still resort to informal work due to barriers such as language proficiency, credential recognition, and limited access to specific job sectors.

These differences illustrate how labour market structures and migration policies shape Uzbek migrants' experiences in Finland and Sweden, influencing their legal status, employment opportunities, and economic security. Whilst Sweden presents more opportunities for informal employment, leading to a higher number of undocumented workers, Finland's system provides more legal pathways, whilst not entirely eliminating precarity in employment. In the next section, we explore the complex relationship between migrants and crime, examining how migrants can be both victims of exploitation and crime and perpetrators of petty crimes, as well as how this can impact their experiences in the host societies.

Victimisation and Crime

The jobs in which most Uzbek migrants are employed consist primarily of unskilled labour: construction, agriculture, cleaning, domestic work, and the food service industries. Since undocumented migrants are unable to find employment in the official labour market, they must resort to the informal economy, where wages lie below national standards and working hours are long. Employers take advantage of these migrants' precarious and vulnerable positions, ignoring national labour law standards and intimidating their employees against going to the authorities to protest exploitative working conditions. Many migrants had to engage in heavy, menial, low-paying, and informal jobs. Thus, Uzbek migrants in Finland and Sweden are vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, fraud, and crime given their precarious legal and social status. Moreover, many undocumented migrants, particularly in Sweden, find themselves targets of exploitation, whilst even documented migrants in Finland may experience deception, wage theft, and threats given their dependence upon employers and their limited knowledge of their rights. The experiences

of Uzbek migrants in both countries illustrate the vulnerabilities associated with migration, the barriers to seeking justice, and the ways in which migrants attempt to navigate these challenges.

One of the most widespread forms of victimisation is workplace exploitation, including wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and employer intimidation. In Sweden, where many Uzbek migrants work informally, they often have no legal contracts and, therefore, little recourse when employers refuse to pay wages or subject them to abusive conditions. The informal nature of their employment means they cannot claim benefits or seek legal protections.

The following story, from Farhod, an undocumented Uzbek migrant, is illustrative and more or less similar to those of many other undocumented Uzbek migrants who must live in the shadows and endure precarity and insecurity in Sweden.

Farhod has been residing in Sweden for three years. He had applied for asylum as soon as he entered the country, but his asylum application was denied. Initially, when his case was under consideration by the Swedish Migration Agency, he had an LMA card (asylum seeker card) allowing him to find a temporary, part-time position at a cleaning company in Stockholm. The outsourcing firm dispatched Farhod and his colleagues to clean hotels and offices in different parts of the city. However, due to a high number of workers and limited assignments, Farhod struggled to secure sufficient shifts to sustain his income needs. His financial concerns were particularly pressing as he not only needed to support himself, but also needed to send remittances back home. Simultaneously, Farhod engaged in a series of daily jobs. Similar to many other Uzbek migrants in Sweden, he would look for daily jobs through Uzbek groups on Telegram, designated Russian-language pages on different social media platforms, and via TipTap, a marketplace for individuals offering or looking for short-term, daily jobs. At the same time, he continued applying for different long-term, regular jobs, but could not secure any employment until his case received a final refusal, upon which he received a deportation order from the Swedish authorities. However, Farhod decided to not leave Sweden, and instead chose to remain in the 'shadows', since, by now, he had learnt to navigate the informal sector. Consequently, he has worked in many places—picking berries, moving furniture, clearing snow, cleaning on cruise ships, and various other tasks. Like many other Uzbeks who shared their experiences with us, Farhod has

encountered instances of deceit. He explains his precarious and vulnerable conditions as follows:

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

In Finland, where work-based migration is more common, Uzbek migrants often arrive holding formal employment contracts. However, this does not always protect them from wage theft and contract violations. Some employers take advantage of migrants' lack of language skills and unfamiliarity with Finnish labour laws to underpay or dismiss them unfairly.

I signed a contract for construction work, but after a few months, they stopped paying. When I asked for my salary, they threatened to report me for visa violations, even though I had all my papers in order. (*Shavkat, 41, migrant in Vantaa*)

Unlike in Sweden, Uzbek migrant workers in Finland enjoy more legal protections, although many still fear retaliation or losing their work permits if they report violations. Their dependency upon employers for visa renewals discourages many from challenging exploitative conditions.

For instance, consider the case of Nazarbek, 48, who entered Sweden three years ago using a Latvian work visa (unsuitable for Swedish employment). After a year of informal work in various roles, he applied for asylum but faced rejection. Choosing to remain in the country, Nazarbek secured a position at a ventilation installation company in Stockholm. However, his undocumented status led to a significantly lower salary. The company's owner pledged to aid Nazarbek's regularisation after a year, conditional upon hard work and tax payments. To accommodate his lack of a bank account, the company agreed to deposit Nazarbek's

wages into an acquaintance's account, for which he paid a monthly fee of 1000 kronor (100 US\$). Regular payslips were emailed to Nazarbek, indicating that one-quarter of his already modest earnings were deducted as taxes. After more than a year of work, Nazarbek reminded his boss of the promised regularisation and pay raise. In response, his boss threatened police involvement, leaving Nazarbek unaware that hiring an undocumented migrant is also a legal violation. This coerced him into quitting his job. Upon seeking assistance from a trade union which aided undocumented migrants, Nazarbek discovered that the purported payslips were fraudulent and no tax payments had been made on his behalf.

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

As mentioned above, undocumented migrants are afraid of seeking help in official healthcare facilities. Instead, when they fall sick, many undocumented migrants often turn to informal methods of healthcare. They purchase prescription drugs through designated Telegram channels, where other documented migrants bring them from Uzbekistan (given that many drugs requiring a prescription in Finland and Sweden are sold over-the-counter in Uzbekistan). Some migrants with nursing experience in Uzbekistan, but without a licence in Finland or Sweden, may offer informal healthcare services.

When faced with a strain to increase their income, some migrants, both documented and undocumented, may take on additional, often informal, jobs outside their normal working hours. These may include occasional or daily tasks in the cleaning, moving, or construction industries or even collecting cans and plastic bottles. Whilst these income-generating opportunities remain within legal boundaries, we emphasise that the above-mentioned sale of prescription drugs or the provision of healthcare services without a valid licence are illegal. We observed instances on Telegram channels when some individuals openly advertised dubious services, such as unlawfully obtaining necessary work or residency permits

in Finland, Sweden or other EU countries or, in the case of Sweden, offering their bank accounts (cards) or addresses for ‘rent’ amongst other services.

The above situation highlights the correlation between undocumentedness and informality, which can lead migrants to engage in petty crimes or even illegal activities. Moreover, in some cases, undocumented as well as documented migrants resort to informal activities to increase their income. The strains faced by undocumented migrants, combined with their lack of legitimate means to achieve their goals, can lead them to engage in deviant behaviours. Furthermore, the precarious living conditions of undocumented migrants may force them to do whatever it takes to survive, as described below by one of our informants:

I came here through Poland. It’s nearly impossible to come directly to Sweden. I spent more than 5000 [US] dollars to pay for middlemen’s fees, visas, flights, and so on. Now, I have to earn as much as possible not only to repay my debts quickly but also to feed my family. I try to take as many jobs as possible, and I try to save whenever it’s possible. Sometimes, I collect cans, I try to evade paying bus fares. I even stole unattended bicycles several times and resold them. I know it’s bad, but when you don’t have a regular income and when debt collectors disturb your family every now and then, the pressure to earn more is so big. I am ready to do anything in these moments. (*Jamshid, 32, migrant in Stockholm*)

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

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

Victimisation and crime amongst Uzbek migrants in Finland and Sweden take different forms due to differences in migration policies

and legal protections. In Sweden, where many migrants are undocumented, workplace exploitation, financial fraud, and employer coercion are widespread, and migrants have little recourse due to a fear of deportation. In Finland, legal migration channels, in the case of Uzbeks, offer greater protections, but some migrants still experience deception, coercion, and wage theft. The primary barriers for migrants in both countries are a fear of authorities, a dependency upon employers, and limited knowledge of their legal rights.

CONCLUSIONS

This research examines the nexus of undocumented migration, informality, and crime in the Nordic context, using the case of Uzbek migrants in Finland and Sweden. Drawing upon strain theory, in this chapter we have shown how migrants' undocumented or precarious status and limited access to legal employment can lead to a significant strain, vulnerability, and susceptibility to becoming both victims and, in some cases, perpetrators of crime. Although studies on the experiences of undocumented migrants in the Nordic context are abundant, very little research delves into the complex relationship between victimisation and criminal involvement amongst migrants. In this study, we have contributed to filling this gap by incorporating a comparative perspective, examining how different legal and socioeconomic structures in Finland and Sweden shape migrants' experiences.

We utilised strain theory to explain how undocumentedness and informality lead to vulnerability amongst migrants, including their susceptibility to committing and being victims of crime. In the case of undocumented migrants in Sweden, their irregular status and exclusion from legal employment and welfare services create economic and psychological strains. This, in turn, drives many into the informal economy, where they face exploitation and marginalisation. The constant fear of deportation further exacerbates their vulnerability, rendering them more susceptible to fraud, coercion, and survival-based criminal activities. By contrast, in Finland, where more migrants enter through formal labour migration pathways, the risk of undocumentedness is lower, although migrants still encounter exploitation, contract fraud, and financial scams. Whilst Finnish migrants may have better legal protections, the power imbalance between

employers and migrant workers—particularly in sectors like the construction industry—can still push them into situations of economic and legal precarity.

The use of several research methods in this study provided a multi-dimensional perspective on the experiences of undocumented Uzbek migrants in Finland and Sweden. Such an approach allowed for a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of how victimisation and informal survival strategies shape migrants' lived realities. This study also highlights how migrants' interactions with authorities, employers, mediators, and their own communities influence their decisions regarding legal and informal economic activities.

Importantly, we note that not all migrants choose to commit crimes, and those who do should, therefore, not be generalised or stigmatised as being inherently criminal. Rather, criminal activities amongst migrants are often shaped by systemic constraints, including their deportability, structural violence, and economic necessity. Many factors, including individual circumstances and social conditions, may contribute to their decision to engage in illegal activities. Moreover, the metaphors of a 'shadow economy' or a 'parallel world of migrants', commonly used to depict the hidden, marginalised, and often informal nature of undocumented labour, require critical examination. Whilst these terms help illuminate the vulnerabilities and precariousness faced by undocumented migrants, they may also reinforce invisibility and exclusion. A more nuanced understanding is needed to ensure that migrants are not merely viewed through the lens of illegality and criminality, but as individuals navigating complex sociolegal landscapes and experiencing strain on a daily basis.

Whilst this study has provided important insights into the vulnerabilities faced by Uzbek migrants in Finland and Sweden, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the study adopts a comparative approach, our research is primarily based on qualitative data, which may not fully capture the diversity of migrant experiences across different sectors and legal statuses. Second, gendered perspectives remain underexplored, whereby this study focused predominantly on male migrants, who constitute the majority of Uzbek labour migrants in the region. Future research should incorporate the experiences of female migrants, as well as migrants from other Central Asian countries, to offer a more comprehensive understanding of victimisation, informal survival strategies, and legal navigation. Finally, this study does not extensively explore the transition

from an undocumented to a documented status, nor does it assess long-term integration outcomes for migrants who manage to regularise their status. Future research could examine pathways to legalisation, its effects on economic stability, and the broader implications for Nordic migration policy.

In summary, this study provides valuable insights into the interplay between undocumented migration, informality, and crime amongst Uzbek migrants in Finland and Sweden. However, there remains much to be explored in terms of legal transitions, gendered vulnerabilities, and broader policy responses. Future research could address these limitations and deepen our understanding of the vulnerabilities and coping strategies of undocumented migrants within the nexus of undocumentedness, informality, and crime.

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