

THB and Labour Exploitation: Key Study Findings

Cornelia Riehle

News

In December 2025, the EU Anti-Trafficking Hub [published](#) a new [study](#) examining trafficking in human beings (THB) for the purpose of labour exploitation, drawing on examples from Italy, Finland, France, Spain, and the Netherlands. The study analyses how THB for labour exploitation is addressed across national systems, highlighting the complexity of existing legal frameworks and the persistent challenges in distinguishing trafficking from other forms of labour exploitation.

The publication is structured into four main sections:

- Section 1 introduces the phenomenon of trafficking for labour exploitation, presents the “continuum of exploitation” as a guiding conceptual framework, and outlines relevant EU and international definitions. It also gives an overview of national legislation in the selected Member States.
- Section 2 examines how different legal concepts are interpreted and applied in practice, with a particular focus on national case law.
- Section 3 identifies regulatory and practical gaps and challenges, while also highlighting national approaches, tools, and promising practices.
- Section 4 sets out concrete recommendations to strengthen legal and institutional responses to trafficking for labour exploitation.

The concept of a “continuum of exploitation,” which situates human trafficking alongside forced labour and other forms of severe labour abuse within EU and international legal frameworks, is central to the analysis. This approach recognises labour exploitation as a spectrum of harmful practices that may evolve over time and encompass acts of differing severity, manifested through varying degrees of vulnerability, dependency, and coercion. However, operationalising this perspective remains challenging, particularly within criminal justice systems designed to address single offences rather than evolving patterns of exploitation. As a result, depending on national legislation, situations of labour exploitation may fall under administrative, labour law, or criminal justice mechanisms. The absence of specific criminalisation of serious labour exploitation in many Member States, combined with limited awareness among practitioners, further complicates effective identification and response. Against this background, the report explores the use of complementary criminal and administrative offences as alternative enforcement tools and reviews national practices, including the role of labour inspectors, specialised authorities, and national action plans.

The study concludes with targeted recommendations:

- Strengthening the use of the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive;
- Developing national guidelines and common trafficking indicators;

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- Proactively initiating investigations where indicators are present;
- Ensuring access to comprehensive victim support and remedies;
- Investing in specialised investigators, prosecutors, and judges with expertise in labour exploitation cases.

The publication complements recent work by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and the European Labour Authority (ELA), which jointly released a practical guide and training manual to support labour inspectors in identifying and addressing labour exploitation in the workplace (→[eucrim 3/2025, 206-207](#)).

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