

HUMAN TRAFFICKING SERIES

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Human Sex Trafficking: An Overview

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What Is Human Sex Trafficking?

Recent media, scholarly, and policy attention has been paid to the national and international sex trafficking of individuals. Human sex trafficking is the buying and/or selling of a person in exchange for a commercial sex act (Schauer & Wheaton, 2006). The victims involved in sex trafficking are often vulnerable, voiceless, and controlled through violence or threats of violence by a trafficker, more commonly known as a “pimp” (Farley et al., 2004). Human sex trafficking is referred to as “modern day slavery” (Venkatraman, 2003), and empirical research has demonstrated the significance of the problem both internationally and domestically (Schauer & Wheaton, 2006). The victims of sex trafficking, who are overwhelmingly women and children, suffer from significant physical and mental health issues as a result of their victimization (Farley, 2003).

Trafficking Victims Protection Act

Federal legislation was created by the United States government and authorized in 2000 to fight human trafficking. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), and its subsequent reauthorizations, protect the victims involved in human trafficking and establish punishment for traffickers and buyers by specifically defining what human trafficking entails (OFAW, 2000). Severe forms of trafficking in persons have been classified by the TVPA in two ways:

- “Sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age” (22 U.S.C. §7102(9)(A))
- “The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to



involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery” (22 U.S.C. §7102(9)(B)).

To be sure, the TVPA identifies that sex trafficking must involve a commercial sex act in which something of value (like money or in-kind goods) is traded for a sex act and that victims of sex trafficking are *either* induced by force, fraud, or coercion *or* are under the age of 18 (OFAW, 2000). The burden for prosecutors then, is in demonstrating that adult victims were forced, defrauded, or coerced into the sex trade. Research has identified the difficulty that

adult victims of sex trafficking have had in terms of being identified as victims (Rieger, 2007), often because they were trafficked as youth and were unable to leave the sex trade. The TVPA underscores the need to define youth who have been prostituted (even those perceived to be “conforming” or “willing”) as victims rather than offenders where no proof of force, fraud, or coercion is called for. This law gives merit to their victimization by legally identifying them as victims, which allows for access to appropriate services from police and social service providers, such as mental health professionals and social workers (Rieger, 2007). Indeed, the law facilitates treatment and service response for persons identified as victims of sex trafficking.

Prevalence of Sex Trafficking

Determining accurate estimates of the prevalence of sex trafficking has been a challenging endeavor, in part, due to the hidden nature of victimization and strategies employed by traffickers to disguise the identities of their victims with methods such as withholding birth certificates, passports and other forms of legal identification (Schauer & Wheaton, 2006). Indeed, data is difficult to obtain, and methodological strategies are not consistent across locales (Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005). Nevertheless, both government and non-government organizations have

attempted to quantify the problem of sex trafficking, globally, internationally into the United States, and domestically within U. S. borders. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services (2009), approximately 600,000 to 800,000 individuals are trafficked globally each year. Of these, approximately seventy percent are trafficked for the purposes of commercial sex (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace, 2009). Moreover, grassroots organizations have estimated that about 2 million children are sex trafficked across international borders each year (Equality Now, 2005).

A sizable number of individuals, mostly women and children, are trafficked into the United States every year from countries around the world. Estimates by the U. S. Department of State (2004) have implied a substantial reduction in the numbers of persons trafficked internationally, suggesting that approximately 14,500 to 17,500 persons have been and continued to be brought into the U.S. annually from countries such as the Ukraine, Thailand, the Philippines, and Mexico (Estes & Weiner, 2001).

While significant attention is paid to both global and international sex trafficking (Kara, 2009), recent scholarly and advocacy efforts have focused on quantifying the problem of domestic sex trafficking, which affects U. S. citizens or legal residents and occurs within U. S. borders. It is beneficial to establish reliable estimates of the number of persons that fall victim to domestic sex trafficking in order to devise effective strategies for the identification of commercially sexually exploited persons, intervention strategies, and aftercare that draws on clinical and social service provision. The non-profit advocacy organization, Shared Hope, has estimated that at least 100,000 children are being sexually exploited through forced prostitution each year in the United States. To be sure, the average age of entry into forced prostitution is between the ages of 12 and 14, with victims reported as young as five years old. Consequently, it is not surprising that youth victims have substantial difficulty in attempting to exit the sex trade once they reach adulthood due to barriers including violence and control by traffickers, limited options for paid labor, negative perceptions of women who have been prostituted, and a host of mental and physical health ailments (Estes & Weiner, 2001; Kotrla, 2010).

Risks for Sex Trafficking Victimization

The most common risk factors associated with entrance into forced prostitution have included youthful age, familial dysfunction, child sexual and physical abuse, child neglect, and homelessness (Estes & Weiner, 2001; Farley et al., 2004; Reid, 2011). Mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, borderline personality disorder, and other internalizing symptomatology also enhance vulnerability for youth as suitable targets for sex trafficking (Estes & Weiner, 2001, Murray, 1993). Indeed, a host of children and teenagers run away from home due to abuse and familial dysfunction, like alcoholism and drug abuse, and many find themselves living on the street (Silbert & Pines, 1982). In Reid's (2011) retrospective analysis of sex trafficking risk factors, 20 percent of subjects who ran away from home as children were later prostituted as compared to only seven percent of their non-runaway counterparts—a statistical-

ly significant and substantively meaningful difference. To be sure, research has demonstrated that one of the primary reasons youth run away is the result of sexual victimization experienced in the family-of-origin (Simons & Whitbeck, 1991). Studies have shown that 55 percent to 90 percent of victims of sex trafficking report having been sexually abused as children, and at least 75 percent of victims report being homeless at one time (Farley et al. 2004). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the United States Department of Justice estimates that approximately 1.7 million children, most of whom are between the ages of 15 to 17 years old, are on the streets at any given time (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002).

Homeless and shelter youth lack prosocial support from adult providers—consequently, they face increased risk for a number of adverse consequences, including sexual assault, physical violence, and manipulation and control by traffickers (i.e., “pimps;” Silbert & Pines, 1982; Shared Hope, 2012). Research has consistently found that sex traffickers prey on homeless youth and manipulate their vulnerabilities, including the basic need for shelter, food, social support, love, care, and self-esteem (Kennedy et al., 2007). Moreover, many homeless youth have reported feelings of hopelessness, are without options to sustain themselves, and subsequently resort to “survival sex” (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004). Research estimates vary widely between 8.5 percent and 70 percent of runaway and homeless youth who have engaged in survival sex to obtain the necessary essentials to survive, including food and shelter (Estes & Weiner, 2001).

Consequences of Victimization

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Victims of sex trafficking are at a higher risk than the general population for a number of physical health problems. These include injuries from physical and sexual assault, sexually transmitted infections (STI), and substance use and abuse (Farley et al., 2004). Research has demonstrated that 70 percent to 95 percent of victims are physically assaulted while trafficked and 88 percent are subject to verbal abuse. Physical abuse has produced contusions, lacerations, broken bones, head trauma, and neurological dysfunction. Moreover, a staggering 60 percent to 75 percent of victims report being raped by both traffickers and buyers, which produces gynecological distress from trauma to the body (Farley, 2003). Victims are also at high risk for unwanted pregnancy and forced abortion. An increased risk of STIs includes HIV and cervical cancer (Raymond, Hughes & Gomez, 2001; Farley et al., 2003). To combat the psychological aftermath associated with these extreme forms of trauma, victims often resort to drugs and alcohol, which have become a common coping strategy to mitigate their experiences in the sex trade. This chemical dependency often leads to additional physical and mental health problems, producing a cycle of victimization and trauma, injury, substance abuse, and adverse mental health outcomes (Raymond et al., 2001).

MENTAL HEALTH

Findings have indicated that a substantial portion of sex trafficking victims experience adverse mental health outcomes, including posttraumatic stress disorder, increased suicidal ideation, and internalizing disorders, such as high levels of depression and generalized anxiety (Raymond et al., 2001; Farley et al., 2004). Specifically, research has reported that approximately 68 percent of individuals involved in sex trafficking meet the criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder. Furthermore, as many as 100 percent of sex trafficking victims meet diagnostic criteria for some form of mental health illness (Muftic & Finn, 2013), which only exacerbates the potential for enhanced vulnerability to continued abuse, victimization, and chemical dependency.

Discussion

Human sex trafficking remains a significant problem both within the United States and internationally. The TVPA has provided the scaffolding for the federal prosecution of traffickers and buyers and for protecting victims within the United States. Much work remains, however, in terms of efforts geared toward eliminating the problem of sex trafficking and its consequences. Domestically, risk factors for entrance into the sex trade and the host of adverse physical and mental health consequences of victimization highlight the vulnerability of women and children. Similarly, the importance of education and awareness programs for service providers and first responders is underscored as a necessity to counter the negative impact that sex trafficking has on the lives of hundreds of thousands of victims.

Endnotes

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Resources

Shared Hope International- Information on sex trafficking

www.sharedhope.org

Polaris Project- Information on human trafficking

www.polarisproject.org

United Against Human Trafficking – Houston, TX resource center (formerly Houston Rescue & Restore Coalition)

www.houstonrr.org

The National Human Trafficking Resource Center & Hotline

1-888-373-7888

Relevant Readings

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