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Sex Trafficking of Minors in the U.S.: Implications for Policy, Prevention and Research

Kimberly Kotrla

Baylor University, Kim_Kotrla@baylor.edu

Beth Ann Wommack

Baylor University, Beth_Wommack@baylor.edu

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Introduction

Substantial numbers of minors, including American youth, fall prey to the lure of human traffickers and wind up in commercially sexually exploitive businesses in the U.S. every year. The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (VTVPA) of 2000¹ defined human trafficking to include “sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age.”^{1(p8)} The VTVPA of 2000¹ delineated that sex trafficking “...means the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act”^(p8) and that a commercial sex act is “...any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person.”^(p9) Pursuant to these definitions, it is crucial to understand that with the passage of this statute, any individual under the age of 18, including a U.S. citizen, who is used in a commercial sex act is a trafficking victim.²

Experts contend there are a minimum of 100,000 U.S. minors, those under the age of 18 who are American citizens or lawful permanent residents of the U.S.,^{3,4} trafficked for commercial sex at the present time with up to 325,000 more at risk for becoming such victims.^{2,3,5} The average age at which youth are being lured into such exploitive situations is approximately 13 years of age, although victims as young as five years of age have been identified.^{6,7}

These children are being victimized through prostitution, pornography, stripping, brothels, massage parlors, and other forms of commercial sex businesses. Despite the illegal nature of these activities, according to the 2010 Trafficking in Persons⁸ report released by the U.S. Department of State, there were 306 children rescued from prostitution in 2009 in this country. More concerning, however, is the fact that there were 849 minors *arrested* for prostitution in 2008.⁹

While more attention is being paid to this vulnerable population, much remains unknown, making the need for more research critical. The purpose of this study is to create a “snapshot” of potential victims through secondary data analysis of 115 cases of minor sex trafficking in the U.S. involving 153 victims over a nine-year period, and to discuss implications for prevention and intervention policies. The term “minor sex trafficking” refers to cases of commercial sexual exploitation involving individuals under the age of 18.

Methodology

Minor sex trafficking cases were identified through two main venues: press releases archived on the U.S. Department of Justice website and an online search of media reports. Cases were included if they occurred in the time period from October 28, 2000, which coincided with the passage of the VTVPA, through October 31, 2009. Online searches were conducted using phrases including “child trafficking,” “domestic minor sex trafficking,” and “child prostitution.” U.S. Department of Justice press releases were chosen since this is the federal entity that often prosecutes human trafficking cases. Media reports were also reviewed since not all human trafficking cases are prosecuted at the federal level.

In order to be included in the study, the incident had to have involved a victim under the age of 18, have taken place in the U.S., and have had at least one perpetrator arrested, indicted, or convicted. The arrest, indictment or conviction of a perpetrator is the same criteria used by Kyckelhahn, et al.,¹⁰ in analyzing information provided by federally-funded task forces to research human trafficking investigations in the U.S.

After identifying appropriate episodes, data available in the media reports and press releases were extracted on the following variables and placed into an SPSS database so that appropriate frequencies could be conducted:

- Year the case was identified
- Number of minor victim(s) involved in the case
- Number of trafficker(s)
- Gender of trafficker(s)
- Status of the trafficker(s) (e.g., arrested, indicted or convicted)
- Gender of the victim(s)
- Age of the victim(s) upon rescue or escape
- Ethnicity of the victim(s)
- The victim(s)'s country of origin
- State where the victim(s) were located upon rescue or escape
- Number/type of commercial sex acts in which the victim was exploited (e.g., prostitution, pornography, stripping, escort services)
- How long the victims were in their trafficking situation
- Whether the victim had run away from home
- Whether the victim had been advertised on an Internet website

Results

Incidents of Minor Sex Trafficking

A total of 115 separate incidents involving at least 153 victims (number of victims not always specified) were located. Just over half of the reports were located through online searches (54.8%, n = 63), with the remaining 45.2% (n = 52) identified through reviewing Department of Justice press releases. These occurrences involved 215 traffickers, of whom 152 (70.7%) were male and 63 (29.3%) were female (gender was not available on two perpetrators). Over half of the traffickers in these cases had been convicted (n = 117, 53.4%), with another 70 (32.0%) indicted and 32 (14.6%) arrested.

Table 1
Data on Incidents of Minor Sex Trafficking

| Year of Incident | % | N = 115 |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|----------------|
| 2001 | 1.7 | 2 |
| 2003 | 2.6 | 3 |
| 2004 | 5.2 | 6 |
| 2005 | 3.5 | 4 |
| 2006 | 4.3 | 5 |
| 2007 | 16.5 | 19 |
| 2008 | 21.7 | 25 |
| <u>2009</u> | <u>44.3</u> | <u>51</u> |
| Total | 100.0 | 115 |
| Number of Victims per Incident | % | N = 115 |
| 1 | 43.5 | 50 |
| 2 | 21.7 | 25 |
| 3 | 7.0 | 8 |
| 4 | 1.7 | 2 |
| 5 | 0.9 | 1 |
| 6 | 0.9 | 1 |
| 9 | 0.9 | 1 |
| <u>Multiple victims</u> | <u>23.5</u> | <u>27</u> |
| Total | 100.0 | 115 |

The year in which the sex trafficking incidents were identified and the number of victims involved are displayed in Table 1. The date of discovery of the majority of episodes occurred in the late 2000s, with the preponderance (44.3%, $n=51$) taking place in 2009, followed by 21.7% ($n=25$) in 2008 and 16.5% ($n=19$) in 2007. Only 20 records (17.3%) of minor sex trafficking incidents occurring prior to 2007 were found. It was most common for incidents to involve a single victim (43.5%, $n=50$), followed by two (21.7%, $n=25$) and then three (7.0%, $n = 8$). Almost one-fourth of the incidents reported the involvement of multiple victims (23.5%, $n=27$), but did not report specific numbers or other information regarding the minors. These cases were removed from further analysis.

Characteristics of the Sample

Gender was not specified regarding 9 (5.9%) victims, but the remaining 94.1% ($n = 144$) were all female. Data on the victims' age upon rescue, runaway status, country of origin and length of time in the trafficking incident are summarized in Table 2. Of the 91 victims whose country of origin was known, 64.8% ($n = 59$) were from the U.S. compared to 35.2% ($n = 32$) from other countries. Of the 32 victims known to be from outside of the U.S., 17 (53.1%) were from Mexico, 7 from Honduras (21.9%), 3 from India (9.4%), 2 from Russia (6.2%) and one from Korea (3.2%); specific country of origin was not provided on 2 victims.

Age was reported on 90 of the minors, who ranged in age from 5 to 17, with a mean age of 15.12 ($sd = 1.79$) years. Indication of runaway status was unknown on two-thirds of the sample (68.0%, $n = 104$). One-fifth (20.3%, $n = 31$) of those whose runaway status was known had not run away from home compared to 18 (11.8%) who had. The victim's ethnicity was only reported on 25 victims; of those, 1 victim was Asian, with the remaining 24 identified as Hispanic/Latino.

The length of time in captivity was reported in 67 of the trafficking episodes. It was most common for girls to have been sex trafficked for less than 6 months (20.9%, $n = 32$), followed by between one and one-and-one-half years (5.9%, $n = 9$), and between one-and-one-half and two years (5.2%, $n = 8$). It is also noteworthy that 7 victims (4.6%) had been in slavery between 4 and 5 years.

Table 2
Characteristics of Minor Victims of Sex Trafficking in the U.S.

| Age upon Rescue | % | N = 153 |
|-------------------------------|-------------|----------------|
| 5 years | 0.7 | 1 |
| 12 years | 2.6 | 4 |
| 13 years | 5.2 | 8 |
| 14 years | 11.1 | 17 |
| 15 years | 8.5 | 13 |
| 16 years | 18.3 | 28 |
| 17 years | 12.4 | 19 |
| <u>Unknown</u> | <u>41.2</u> | <u>63</u> |
| Total | 100.0 | 153 |
| Runaway Status | % | N = 153 |
| Yes | 11.8 | 18 |
| No | 20.3 | 31 |
| <u>Unknown</u> | <u>68.0</u> | <u>104</u> |
| Total | 100.0* | 153 |
| Country of Origin | % | N = 153 |
| U.S | 38.6 | 59 |
| Other country | 20.9 | 32 |
| <u>Unknown</u> | <u>40.5</u> | <u>62</u> |
| Total | 100.0 | 153 |
| Longevity in Captivity | % | N = 153 |
| Less than 6 months | 20.9 | 32 |
| 6 months – 1 year | 3.9 | 6 |
| 1 – 1 ½ years | 5.9 | 9 |
| 1 ½ - 2 years | 5.2 | 8 |
| 2-3 years | 1.3 | 2 |
| 3 – 4 years | 2.0 | 3 |
| 4 – 5 years | 4.6 | 7 |
| <u>Unknown</u> | <u>56.2</u> | <u>86</u> |
| Total | 100.0 | 153 |

*per SPSS output

Methods of Recruitment and Exploitation

The means by which these young females were lured into commercial sexual exploitation and the number of activities in which they were victimized are reflected in Table 3. The method of recruitment was unknown in over half of the cases. When this information was available, the most common form of entrapment was through some type of false promise (16.3%, n = 25), followed by kidnapping (9.8%, n = 15). The majority of victims (60.8%, n = 93) were exploited through a single activity, almost one-fourth (22.2%, n = 34) abused through two commercial sex practices, and 20 victims (13.1) traumatized in three different practices.

Table 3
Methods of Recruitment and Exploitation

| How Recruited | % | N = 153 |
|--|--------------|----------------|
| False promise | 16.3 | 25 |
| Kidnapped | 9.8 | 15 |
| Boyfriend | 3.9 | 6 |
| Coercion | 3.3 | 5 |
| Online | 2.6 | 4 |
| Family member | 2.9 | 3 |
| Originally smuggled | 0.6 | 1 |
| <u>Unknown</u> | <u>61.4</u> | <u>94</u> |
| Total | 100.0 | 153 |
| Number of Activities in which Minor Exploited | % | N = 153 |
| One | 60.8 | 94 |
| Two | 22.2 | 34 |
| Three | 13.1 | 20 |
| Four | 2.0 | 3 |
| <u>Unknown</u> | <u>2.0</u> | <u>3</u> |
| Total | 100.0 | 153 |

The exploitation of victims through commercial sex acts is classified here as prostitution; the taking of sexually explicit photographs of the victim is categorized as pornography. As indicated in Table 4, virtually all of these young victims (94.1%, n = 144) were prostituted. Notably, 24.8% (n = 38) of these young victims had advertisements for their “services” posted on an internet site.

Table 4
Activities in Which Minors Exploited

| Used in Activity? | Yes % (#) | No or Unknown % (#) |
|-------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Prostitution | 94.1 (144) | 5.9 (9) |
| Pornography | 17.6 (27) | 82.4 (126) |
| Stripping | 6.5 (10) | 93.5 (143) |
| Escort Services | 8.5 (13) | 91.5 (140) |
| Internet Posting | 24.8 <u>(38)</u> 153 | 75.2 <u>(115)</u> 153 |

State in Which Victim Found

The location of victims upon rescue or escape was known in 114 incidents. Table 5 displays the number of cases discovered in each state. Victims were rescued across the country in 22 states and Washington, D.C. The site with the most cases was Texas, with 20, followed by Michigan, with 12; California and Washington, D.C., with 10 each; and Georgia, with 7.

Table 5
Locations Where Victims Rescued or Escaped

| State Victim Found | N = 153 | % |
|--------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Texas | 20 | 13.1 |
| Michigan | 12 | 7.8 |
| California | 10 | 6.5 |
| Washington D.C. | 10 | 6.5 |
| Georgia | 7 | 4.6 |
| Kansas | 6 | 3.9 |
| New York | 6 | 3.9 |
| Connecticut | 5 | 3.3 |
| Maryland | 5 | 3.3 |
| Alaska | 4 | 2.6 |
| Nebraska | 4 | 2.6 |
| Missouri | 3 | 2.0 |
| North Carolina | 3 | 2.0 |
| Tennessee | 3 | 2.0 |
| Washington | 3 | 2.0 |
| Arkansas | 2 | 1.3 |
| Florida | 2 | 1.3 |
| Hawaii | 2 | 1.3 |
| Ohio | 2 | 1.3 |
| South Carolina | 2 | 1.3 |
| New Jersey | 1 | .7 |
| Oregon | 1 | .7 |
| Utah | 1 | .7 |
| <u>Unknown</u> | <u>39</u> | <u>25.5</u> |
| Total | 153 | 100 |

Discussion

Contributions of Study Findings to the Field

Need for More Accurate and Accessible Data

In the present study, pertinent information on many victims was frequently unavailable. Since anti-trafficking efforts in the U.S. are relatively new, it is recommended that a comprehensive, systematic means of gathering data on human trafficking cases and victims be established. Northeastern University has been awarded a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to implement such a data collection system.¹¹ In order to accomplish this, Northeastern University will amass information from federally funded law enforcement task forces. While this is an excellent beginning, in order to be more inclusive of all human trafficking victims, the efforts must eventually be expanded to other law enforcement agencies around the nation and to non-governmental organizations which provide needed services to victims of trafficking. Additionally, researchers interested in studying this population need access to this data in order to help inform anti-trafficking efforts.

Need for Improved Services to Minor Sex Trafficking Victims

Any amount of time spent in enslavement is unfathomable. Some of the victims in this study had been held in sexual captivity for years, meaning that it will take years of victim-centered services for them to be able to recover to the point of simply functioning. It has been noted that there is a critical need for improved services for victims of minor sex trafficking, especially safe, secure housing.^{12,13} The current system simply cannot meet the needs of victims. The data from this study indicates that the number of minor sex trafficking cases being identified annually is growing, making it imperative that creative approaches to assisting this population are adopted. The state of Washington has passed legislation that not only creates a safe harbor law, but also establishes comprehensive services including the creation of safe shelters in each county. In addition to safe housing, victim needs include access to health care, dental care, mental health services, education and training programs, legal assistance, and translator and language assistance. These services are available in some communities for international victims, but are often difficult to obtain for U.S. minors.² All states may not possess the resources to develop shelters that offer comprehensive services in each county, but a plan should be created to meet the needs of victims discovered within their borders.

Need for Expanded Prevention Efforts

The victims in this sample were, on average, 15 years of age, primarily female, from the U.S., and had *not* run away from home. This is important because it is generally believed that those youth at highest risk of falling into the hands of traffickers are those who have run away from home.¹⁴ Victims most commonly ended up in exploitive situations through some type of false promise, followed by kidnapping. While it is customary for traffickers to use false promises and to search for victims online through social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace,¹⁵ kidnapping is not a means of entry into sex trafficking that is typically considered common in the U.S. This reality must be included in prevention work with our younger generation, particularly girls, and prevention education must begin much earlier than the average age of entry into sexual exploitation, 13 years. Education for youth about the realities of trafficking, how pimps recruit victims, and how to avoid being exploited is needed, and schools, churches, and runaway shelters are examples of appropriate settings in which to implement such programs. The Salvation Army (see <http://www.salvationarmyusa.org/usn/www.usn.2.nsf>) and the Global Nomads Group, an international organization that creates interactive educational programs for students about global issues, (see <http://www.gng.org/pulse/fall2008/Human-Trafficking-LP.pdf>) are two of multiple agencies that offer free educational resources on human trafficking that could be easily adapted to these settings.

Contributions of Background Knowledge and Study Findings to Policy Recommendations

Need for Safe Harbor Laws

The manner in which minors coming out of commercial sexual exploitation are treated matters. More minor victims continue to be arrested rather than rescued from sex trafficking. Fortunately, some states have enacted policies that aim to protect these young victims, but more are needed. According to the Polaris Project,¹⁶ as of May 2010, 23 new state human trafficking bills had already been passed in that year alone. Among those were three new “safe harbor” laws passed in Connecticut and Washington, which follow the example set by New York in 2008 that aims to “significantly reduce or eliminate the criminal responsibility of children for prostitution and instead direct these child victims of sex trafficking to services through the child welfare system.”¹⁶ The governor of Illinois signed a safe harbor bill on August 20, 2010 that shields children under the age of 18 from being charged with prostitution. Additionally, in June 2010, the Texas Supreme Court ruled that children under the age of 14

cannot be charged with prostitution because they do not possess the ability and maturity to consent to sex.¹⁷ It is recommended and hoped that other states will follow the lead of these states in protecting underage trafficking victims.

Need for Mandated Training and Public Awareness Campaigns

The number of minors rescued out of sex trafficking in the U.S. is miniscule compared to the estimates of those who are currently being exploited in some form of commercial sex. Furthermore, almost one-third of the cases in this study involved only one or two victims. Both of these realities indicate that more needs to be done to improve victim identification methods. A few states (California, Florida and Texas, for example) currently require training of law enforcement officers on this issue. Based on the fact that minor sex trafficking victims have been identified in 27 states and Washington, D.C., the ability of law enforcement to recognize potential victims is vital; this, however, will require that more states consider similar action. Additionally, it is recommended that lawmakers carefully consider the expansion of training requirements to other groups who likely come in contact with victims, such as child protective service workers, health care professionals, school personnel, and runaway shelter staff.

Although training various professional groups will improve victim identification, it is recognized that the ability to train all professional groups who might come in contact with trafficking victims is not realistic at this point, for reasons including limited resources to address this tragedy, lack of experts needed to deliver the training, and personnel turnover in agencies. Therefore, legislation supporting statewide public awareness campaigns and providing the necessary funding are recommended. Such initiatives might prove particularly beneficial in rural communities, where education and training on human trafficking are likely to be unavailable or difficult to obtain.

Need to Address Online Advertisements of Minor Sex Trafficking Victims

In the present study, a substantial number of victims had advertisements for their “services” posted by their pimps on the Internet. This is consistent with recent research in ten cities across the U.S. on this same topic by Shared Hope International, which found that the Internet was used in all locations as a means for selling children for sexual purposes.¹⁴ Legislation to establish harsher penalties for individuals and companies that knowingly allow such activity to occur is encouraged.

Study Limitations

It is important to highlight the limitations of the present study. First, findings from the study are based on a relatively small number of cases on which substantial amounts of data were missing on certain variables. The authors also acknowledge that not all minor sex trafficking cases during the time period under consideration were identified through the methodology utilized. The study would have been strengthened had the authors had access to a more thorough database of sex trafficked minors. All of these factors reduce the strength of the implications for prevention and intervention policies.

Despite these limitations this study adds new details about minor sex trafficking victims that currently do not exist in the literature. Furthermore, despite a modest sample size, two-thirds of the perpetrators in these cases have been convicted or indicted, meaning that these cases included real victims.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Areas of Study

Knowledge about minor sex trafficking in the U.S. is beginning to emerge, but more is needed. Analysis of 115 episodes of sex trafficking of minors covering a nine-year period has yielded beneficial information. Improved legislation in the area of professional training, better services for victims, stricter laws for pimps and traffickers, and prevention strategies beginning at a young age are among recommendations for lawmakers and agencies working with this vulnerable population. Studies involving a larger sample of sex trafficked minors are recommended.

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