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Human Trafficking: Awareness, Data and Policy

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In 2006, during a State of the Union address, then-President George W. Bush briefly mentioned human trafficking, along with organized crime and the drug trade, as an international challenge facing the United States. Until that moment, most Americans were unfamiliar with the term. Even today when we discuss the trafficking of children most are likely to see it as an international concern affecting other nations or equate it with our U.S. children being snatched off the street of their neighborhoods by kidnappers. The data, however, are increasingly clear that human trafficking is a complex problem dealing with both forced labor and sexual exploitation, and that there is both an international as well as a domestic aspect to this problem. Accurate numbers for the global challenge related to human trafficking are difficult to come by, as some of the authors in this issue of the *Journal of Applied Research on Children* will highlight; and in comparison to domestic efforts, we are seeing international efforts more clearly identifying and then serving increasing numbers of victims.

In the U.S., the challenge of identifying and responding to international children being trafficked, however sordid, is dwarfed by our increasing awareness of the large numbers of young American children, most of them girls but including boys, that have run away from home only to be sexually exploited by domestic traffickers, more commonly referred to as pimps. To be clear, domestic traffickers or pimps are criminals who prey upon vulnerable children and adolescents to make money via exploitation and victimization of these young people. As we explore the issue of human and child trafficking for sexual exploitation it is important to note that whether these children were brought here under false pretense from another country or whether they ran away from an American home only to be trafficked on the streets of our cities, the challenges facing policymakers, social and health workers, and all those that care for and about these children are relatively new, growing significantly and worthy of academic exploration. This issue of the *Journal of Applied Research on Children* seeks to bring additional light to a subject that so few know much about and on which little scholarly work has been completed.

The issue of human trafficking came to our organization's attention a little over five years ago when an attorney from the Catholic Charities organization came to us and expressed distress that no one was really doing much in terms of creating policy or conducting research in the child trafficking arena. The data were and are scarce and sometimes so masked in the hyperbolic words of advocates that it becomes difficult to determine veracity. As in the area of child abuse, the problem is so upsetting to many and strikes so far from our idyllic views of what childhood should be that we as professionals and as a general public

suffer from what some call "gaze aversion" to the problem.[1] We are so troubled by issues such as child abuse, domestic violence and now human trafficking of children that we tend to avoid staring at the problem much as we avoid looking directly into the sun lest we harm our eyes. States and municipalities have only in the last few years begun to track runaways, teenage prostitution (referred to less pejoratively towards the victim as domestic minor sex trafficking [2]), and homeless youth, and are doing so in no universal manner. Federal and state laws dealing with human trafficking are few, and only beginning to be placed on the books. The first state laws related to human trafficking were passed in 2003 in both the states of Washington and Texas. Texas saw in the seven years that followed no prosecutions from that first landmark piece of legislation.[3] Increasingly new, sensible and workable laws are being introduced and slowly, awareness and community education are enabling the fight against both international and domestic human trafficking. Still, the work on increasing awareness on the issue of trafficking is hindered by stereotypes, stigma and a reliance on conventional wisdom, which leads to a routine misunderstanding of the key policy issues and definitions.

International Trafficking

The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that the number of individuals brought across United States borders for trafficking purposes is between 14,500 and 17,500 each year.[4] In the case of children who are victimized, they are almost always trafficked for sexually exploitive purposes. Trafficking victims arrive via airports, ports, beached ocean craft and secret border crossings. These victims come from Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe and Central and South America. The Department of Justice estimates that the greatest numbers of trafficked victims in the United States come from East Asia and the Pacific, followed by Latin America and Europe and Eurasia.[4] These children, sometimes boys but most often young girls, are smuggled to American cities where they are beaten down physically and mentally and forced to be sexually abused by paying customers. The ages of these children range from 12 to 18 years.

Domestic Trafficking

The National Runaway Switchboard estimates that over eighty percent of children that run away from home have been physically and/or sexually abused.[5] Estimates are that between 1.6 and 2.8 million children run away from home each year in the United States,[6] and more than 244,000 American children have been estimated to be at risk of commercial sexual exploitation.[7] These young runaways arrive in cities in search of a life

away from disruption and abuse suffered at home, and they are typically lured into false romantic relationships with traffickers. In this vulnerable situation, these minors are routinely coerced or forced to sell themselves on the street for the profit of their domestic trafficker. Our understanding of this problem is growing; however the apparent number of children involved in domestic trafficking is grotesquely large and the policies to deal with these children are very slow in developing. The conventional wisdom is that these domestic minor sex trafficking victims are "bad kids" who chose to use drugs, prostitute themselves on the streets and produce pornographic images of themselves for sale. The reality is that these are kids who find themselves in a "bad situation" which makes them easy prey for criminals' intent on profiting from sexually exploiting them in a way that stuns the sensibilities of common citizens. We as a society must institute policies that attack the bad situations, not the vulnerable children and adolescents who are being victimized in our communities.

Policy Regarding the Response to Victims

Until recently the only resources available for the treatment of these victims were federal funds available for international victims who had been trafficked from abroad. Special visas are available for the international victims as well. This has led to a schism among many groups, as this policy has created some manner of humane treatment for victims of international origins, leaving domestic victims, many of whom are minors, not as well-protected. The paradoxical reality is that, for many domestic minor human trafficking victims, their only recourse for services is within the juvenile justice system, not as a victim but as an offender. In order to change this skewed paradigm and fairly serve both international and domestic minor trafficking victims, we as interested professionals and advocates need to first explore the comprehensive set of issues that led to this problem, and determine what sustains it. Additionally, an effective response ought to be grounded in a thorough assessment of what types of needs exist for both the international and domestic minor trafficking victim.

Safe House Movement

Towards that goal of meeting the assessed needs of human trafficking victims, one source of optimism is the movement to create safe houses for the victims of domestic minor sex trafficking. The safe house is seen as a long term residential treatment center for domestic victims to begin to understand the range of options available to them as they seek to move past the trafficking experience. As of late 2010, a total of less than 100 beds nationally were available for residential treatment of domestic minor

sex trafficking victims, but with growing attention an increasing number of communities are seeking to establish this necessary support.[8]

Policy Solutions

The creation of policy that can help to end the trafficking of children, prevent new victims and improve the treatment of victims who have already been affected by trafficking is in a relatively early stage of development. On the national stage the focus is on strengthening borders, cutting down on organized smuggling crimes and increasing the tools for law enforcement and prosecution all of which may have varying impact on ending trafficking. However, as with most criminal practices, if demand exists, and money can be made, the work of policymakers and of those who carry out the policy can be difficult. Research is scarce on the issue of trafficking, and innovative policies are often just well-intentioned ideas. Policies in treatment, prevention, and ending demand are being tested in various locales in the U.S. and around the world. We know policy solutions exist, but we also know that sufficient data and research do not.

Prevention of Trafficking and Ending Demand

One initiative in regards to trafficking is in the area of ending demand. Where once "vacations" to Thailand and other similar locales were thought to be the mainstay of child sexual exploitation, the growing use of Internet sites and other forms of social media have created a new market for exploitation of child victims of trafficking. Many political efforts around ending demand are similar to efforts to end prostitution. So called "John schools," where men who seek to purchase sexual experiences can avoid a first offense on their criminal record through going to a series of weekend classes, have the potential to deter demand. Distributive justice approaches, where property is forfeited and its value is used to support services for human trafficking victims, is another increasingly popular policy aimed at ending trafficking.

What is clear is that a great deal of work in the area of research, public education and awareness, and policy is needed in the area of human trafficking. It is clear to us that with so few academics involved in this area the need for an issue of the journal focused on human trafficking is great. Indeed there is an apparent need for a journal to tackle this subject on a regular basis. This issue of JARC seeks to examine the issue of child trafficking in broad terms, international and domestic, health and safety, policy and law. This important subject takes on even greater significance when one realizes that multitudes of children are being abused through this crime every day and everywhere.

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