

Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Human Trafficking*

Article 6

2011

Human Trafficking, Sex Tourism, and Child Exploitation on the Southern Border

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Recommended Citation

Walters, Jim and Davis, Patricia H. (2011) "Human Trafficking, Sex Tourism, and Child Exploitation on the Southern Border," *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58464/2155-5834.1031>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/childrenatrisk/vol2/iss1/6>

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Human Trafficking, Sex Tourism, and Child Exploitation on the Southern Border

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Southern Methodist University and the Department of Justice AMBER Alert Program for their support in the research and writing of this project.

Human trafficking, slavery and exploitation of the weak are as ancient as civilization itself. Since ancient times, affluent people have kept and traded in slaves for physical pleasure, manual labor, and profit. Over four hundred years ago, Africans were seized from their homelands and carried over the Atlantic to be exported to different parts of the world for labor. The same slaves who were used for labor were often exploited to fulfill the sexual desires of their owners and masters. The bloodiest war in the history of the United States was fought in large part to end the ugly practice of exploiting other human beings for profit, personal gain and pleasure.

Today, we are once again joined in a war. This time it is marked by battles fought largely in private places against shadowy figures who are illusive and ruthless.

Method

Child sexual trafficking is a crime for which few “hard” facts are known or ascertainable, and for which the “known” facts are constantly changing. This paper describes the current situation of child victims of various types of sexual slavery in the volatile context of the U.S.-Mexico border.

This project grew out of a partnership between directors of the Embrey Human Rights Program [EHRP] at Southern Methodist University and the Liaison for Training and Technical Assistance for the Southern Border Initiative [SBI] of the U.S. Department of Justice’s AMBER Alert Program. The mission of the EHRP is to educate students and others to promote and defend human rights around the world. SBI is a federal program designed to improve law enforcement capabilities and capacity related to the investigation and recovery of missing, endangered, abducted and exploited children in the U.S.-Mexico border region. This paper is based on personal knowledge of SBI personnel, discussions with law enforcement, police reports, case studies, media reports, government documents from both the United States and Mexico, and EHRP research in Tucson, Arizona conducted in January, 2011.

Current Law and Statistics on Sex Trafficking

In October 2000, Congress enacted the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA).¹ Prior to this, no comprehensive federal law existed to protect victims of trafficking or to prosecute their traffickers. This often made efforts to combat trafficking inconsistent and ineffective. The TVPA’s most important provision is the definition of “severe forms of trafficking in persons,” which had previously been an area of much confusion. Under the TVPA severe forms of trafficking include:

- Sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or
- Recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purposes of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery. (22 USC 7102 § 103 (8)(A)(B)).

This definition clarifies several things regarding sex trafficking of minors: that any child under the age of 18 engaged in the sex industry is considered to be “trafficked,” even if the trafficker did not employ force, fraud, or coercion; that transportation of a victim for participation in the sex industry is not a necessary element of trafficking; and that crossing of international (or state) borders is not a necessary element of the crime either.

Most people do not understand that trafficking is a global problem with local implications. Human trafficking has been reported in all 50 of the United States, Washington D.C., and the U.S. territories. Victims of domestic trafficking can be children or adults, male or female.²

People see the victims every day, but they are not always recognizable as such. Victims are forced to work in domestic servitude, sweatshops, agricultural industries and the commercial sex trade.² Many times they are found working side by side with others who labor voluntarily, or have been forced into situations by economic need.

The U.S. Department of State’s 2008 Trafficking in Persons Report estimates that approximately 800,000 victims are trafficked across international borders each year.³ Of those victims, between 14,500 and 17,500 are trafficked into the United States from Asia, Central and South America, and Eastern Europe.⁴ State Department figures, however, do not take into account internal victims of domestic trafficking.^{3,5}

Challenges exist in capturing the actual numbers of those trafficked because of the inherent secrecy. Human trafficking and exploitation are hidden crimes, never intended to be seen or scrutinized. Victims often do not view themselves as victims. They fear police and other authorities because they believe they will be deported, arrested or further victimized by the authorities.⁶

In addition, traffickers often move their victims quickly and frequently. Profits to traffickers are great enough that if a victim is purchased more frequently or at a higher price in markets with fewer victims, (e.g., Tennessee as compared to California), it is in the trafficker’s

best interest to transport the victim across the United States to those less-saturated markets. The financial burden of moving the victim is mitigated, because she can be sold at truck stops and rest stations while being transported. Consistent movement of victims, online solicitations, and re-trafficking to other markets gives traffickers advantages over law enforcement. It makes counting victims almost impossible, and generates revenue while abandoning the traditional operation of a brothel, a far riskier enterprise.⁷

Sexual Trafficking across the U.S.–Mexico Border

Although crossing international boundaries is not a legal element of the crime of trafficking, as noted above, it is a tragic fact of life on the U.S.-Mexico border. Unfortunately, this fact is often lost in the emotions and politics of the current national debate on immigration. The U.S. Department of State estimates that as many as 20,000 young women and children are trafficked across the border from Mexico each year.⁸ Conviction rates of traffickers remain low, however. Prosecution is made difficult by jurisdictional issues, border violence and victims' fear of reprisal by traffickers. In addition, victims resist coming forward for fear of deportation back to Mexico or other countries in Central and South America.

Women and children who are transported to the United States from Mexico by traffickers face not only the risks inherent in being trafficked, but also the serious risks of the journey. Each year, between 400 and 500 people are known to die while attempting to cross the border between Mexico and the United States. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security reported that 417 people died trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border in 2009, the most recent year for which statistics are available.⁹ The numbers are probably higher. These are only the cases discovered or reported in the United States; the numbers of those who die while still in Mexico are not known. Also not known is the number of victims who have been swallowed up by the deserts and unforgiving conditions of the American Southwest, never to be discovered.¹⁰

Young girls often unwittingly become trafficking victims when they are singled out by their smugglers (or “coyotes”) during the journey north. They are told they can travel at no cost, if they will agree to work later to pay off their debts. These smugglers/traffickers deceive and dupe the girls through false promises of jobs and other economic opportunities waiting for them in the United States. During their journeys, the girls are shown favoritism, and even given clothes, makeup, and gifts. Upon arriving at their destinations, however, they are informed that they owe a debt to their

smugglers—and they will pay it off by working in the sex industry. In the United States, these girls are often held in slavery-like conditions and forced into prostitution, domestic service, or forced labor. They are terrorized emotionally, forced to take drugs, moved frequently, locked up, raped, beaten, deprived of sleep, and starved. The smugglers knew from the start that exploitation would be the cost of the “travel now, pay later” deal.

Of course, not everyone who is illegally smuggled across the border by paid guides is being trafficked. Trafficking specifically targets the victim as an object of criminal exploitation. The purpose from the beginning of the trafficking enterprise is to profit from the exploitation of the victim. Smuggling can quickly become trafficking, however, as many people who agree to pay for assistance entering the United States are then forced to provide additional funds, labor or services to the smugglers when they cross the border.¹¹

Some victims of trafficking even possess the necessary documents to enter the United States legally. These women and children typically rely upon traffickers for transportation and sponsorship, only to discover that there is a price for these services. Other victims are kidnapped, sold, and forced to come to the U.S.

As with most organized criminal activity, other crimes occur in conjunction with or as a result of the trafficking of persons. Smuggling of undocumented migrants seeking seasonal work in the United States is also often a means of procuring victims or, at the least, a means of moving those destined for exploitation in another country. Smuggling of weapons and unlicensed goods, money laundering and drug trafficking are closely connected with human trafficking, using the same routes and methods used to traffic people.

Case Example:

In September, 2006 Immigration and Customs Enforcement Special Agent Greg W. Swearngin received information that underage girls from Mexico were being forced to work in several Mexican brothels in the Memphis, Tennessee area. On October 13, 2006, search warrants were executed on seven locations there. Investigators took 27 individuals into custody on a variety of criminal and immigration charges. Information obtained from the search warrants revealed that Juan Mendez and Christiana Perfecto of Nashville, Tennessee were supplying underage girls to brothels located throughout the southeastern United States.

Using the information from the search warrants, the prosecution team was able to locate and rescue a fourteen-year-old minor, "S.C." Through S.C., the prosecution team learned that Juan Mendez would send his girlfriend Christiana Perfecto to a rural village in Oaxaca, Mexico to recruit young girls to come to the United States to work in a Nashville restaurant and to attend American schools. Once the girls arrived, they were threatened, beaten, raped, and then forced to work in brothels in several different states. While these girls agreed to be smuggled into the United States, they were in no way prepared for what awaited them.¹²

Who are the Child Victims of Human Trafficking?

On October 9th, 2010 Mexico's attorney general offered \$1.2 million for information on 14 children who were kidnapped for child trafficking from three cities. In total, 8 boys and 6 girls disappeared around February 25, 2009 from three orphanages, in Casitas del Sur in Tlalpan, Mexico, Centro de Adaptación e Integración Familiar "CAIFAC" in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon and La Casita in Cancún, Quintana Roo Recognition.¹³

Children are being trafficked all over the world, including in Mexico and the United States. As noted above, under the TVPA and subsequent U.S. legislation, minors who are involved in the sex industry are victims, not criminals.¹ Even when they appear willing to be on the street or seem to be selling themselves online, in the vast majority of cases they have pimps or traffickers forcing them into the trade. Unhappily, sometimes minors are arrested on prostitution charges, but their traffickers or pimps go free by hiding behind their victims.

According to a 2008 U.S. Health and Human Services report, trafficking victims share common characteristics that make them vulnerable to traffickers:

- They come from countries or communities with high crime rates, poverty, and corruption.
- They lack opportunities for education.
- They lack family support (e.g. are orphaned, runaway/throwaway, homeless, have family members collaborating with traffickers).
- They have histories of physical and/or sexual abuse.⁶

A 2001 study by the University of Pennsylvania estimated that between 244,000 and 325,000 U.S. children and youth are “‘at risk’ of becoming victims of sexual exploitation, including commercial sexual exploitation (e.g. child pornography, juvenile prostitution, and trafficking in children for sexual purposes).”¹⁴

Runaways and throwaway children comprise the largest “at risk” group. These minors often find themselves in the company of violent, sexually-exploiting, or drug-abusing companions and/or suffer actual or attempted assaults while away from home.

The risks inherent in running away are significant. The National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Throwaway Children (NISMAART) has found that the risks young people encounter during a period of running away or being forced from their homes include involvement in criminal activity, substance abuse, sleeping on the streets, and sexual exploitation, including prostitution. One fifth of the runaways surveyed indicated that they had engaged in sexual activity in exchange for money, drugs, food, shelter or other survival needs. They also experienced an increase in physical assault and other forms of victimization.¹⁵

Once children are recruited, traffickers often isolate them as a means of control. Travel and identity documents may be confiscated as a means of total control, making victims all the more dependent. Most people have never experienced the isolation, disorientation and fear that a victim experiences every day. Reporting themselves to the police or seeking help elsewhere requires courage and knowledge of local conditions, resources, language and institutions, which child victims do not have. Self-declaration and reporting are rare.¹⁶

Who are the Traffickers?

Traffickers are individuals and organizations who trade in human beings as commodities. Traffickers may be foreign-born or domestic, or even members of a victim’s own ethnic or national community. They usually have legal status in the United States. Often they are part of organized crime groups and are increasingly members of Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs). As noted above, they frequently traffic drugs and guns using the same smuggling routes as for people. Some traffickers are also part of family operations that exploit both outsiders and members of the extended family and local community.

Many different kinds of persons engage in human trafficking-- independent contractors, pimps, sexual predators, and diplomats as well as neighbors, friends and relatives. Some of these criminals are

situational, meaning that they engage in trafficking on a limited or one-time basis, while others are full-time purveyors of humans as commodities.

Drug trafficking and human trafficking have increasingly become intertwined. The Mexican National Human Rights Commission reports that some 1,600 migrants are kidnapped in Mexico each month, many by DTOs who use them as mules to carry contraband. The cartels then profit a second time by selling the kidnapped victims to labor contractors in the U.S. or to prostitution rings in Border States and beyond.¹⁷

The DTOs are also involved in trafficking migrants from Central America through Mexico to the United States. These migrants from south of the southern Mexican border have long faced extortion, violence and theft of their money and belongings. Reports have grown of mass kidnappings of migrants, who are forced to give telephone numbers of relatives in the United States or Mexico for purposes of extorting ransom payments. When payments are not made, or migrants do not cooperate, they are often killed or tortured. In August 2010, Mexican President Felipe Calderon released a statement saying that the drug gangs are “resorting to extortion and kidnappings of migrants for their financing and also for recruitment, because they are having a hard time obtaining resources and people.”¹⁸

Traffickers target children because of their vulnerability and gullibility, as well as the market demand for young victims. Those who recruit minors into prostitution violate the TVPA and other federal anti-trafficking laws, even if there is no coercion or movement across state lines.¹ Just as with their counterparts in the United States, Mexican and Central American children who are runaways, throwaways, disenfranchised and from broken homes are at greatest risk.¹⁹

Studies demonstrate that pimps prey on victims as young as 12. Traffickers have been reported targeting their minor victims through the Internet and social networking sites, on telephone chat-lines, in clubs, on the street, through friends, and at shopping malls. They also use fellow students to recruit other girls at schools and after-school programs.²

Child victims are only useful in the sex industry for a short period of time. When they are no longer attractive or young enough, they may be abandoned, further victimized in other ways or, in some cases, killed to prevent disclosure. This discarding of “old” victims creates a need for new prostitutes and children--an endless cycle of supply and demand.

Case Example:

Maria (not her real name) was 16 years old when she was lured into a border gang by a young man on the streets of the deadly Mexican border town of Ciudad Juarez. Maria came from a poor family, with six brothers and sisters. The attention paid to her by a young man with money, and promise of work in the United States, overcame the warnings of others to stay away from the man, whom many believed to be associated with a local cartel. Maria found herself staying in a house on the outskirts of Juarez, with a number of other young women and children. She was introduced to drug use, often against her will. The day came when Maria was asked to have sex with other men to make money for the young man who had brought her into the house. When she refused, Maria was raped by the man and four others.

Any pretense of affection disappeared as Maria was expected to service as many as 30 men a day in a small bedroom with a mattress on the floor and little else. Maria later recounted stories of abuse and beatings for trying to runaway or refusing the orders of her handlers. She witnessed other girls undergo the same abuses, some being made examples while the remaining girls were forced to watch.

Before she was 17, Maria was smuggled across the border to El Paso, TX and later Phoenix, AZ. There she worked out of an apartment, again as a prostitute, her money now going to a middle aged woman who oversaw at least a half dozen girls and women, servicing dozens of men each day. Maria was ultimately caught up in a sweep of undocumented immigrants and returned to Mexico. There is no indication that she tried to tell immigration officials of her circumstances.

Upon return to Mexico, Maria was forced back into the only means of survival she knew. She was involved in prostitution, often servicing "Norteños" or northerners who would travel from the United States to the brothels and massage parlors of Juarez for her services. Maria told human rights officials in Mexico that she witnessed young children, some less than 12 years old, moved through the houses where she worked. By the age of 19 Maria had disappeared. She has not been seen by her family since. They fear that hers may be one of the more than 250 bodies of young women discarded each year in vacant lots and fields around Ciudad Juarez.²⁰

Sex Tourism

Sex tourism is an extremely lucrative underground industry that spans the globe, and is particularly prevalent in communities along the U.S.–Mexico border region. Tens of thousands of Mexican women and girls (as well as men and boys) work as prostitutes in all of the major cities of Mexico. Many of the women and children who serve the sex tourism industry in Mexico engage in what experts term “survival sex”—selling their bodies to survive or support families.

While Mexico has made important efforts to develop a comprehensive policy framework and legislation to combat trafficking in persons in the country, the effective implementation of adequate measures to protect children from trafficking is severely hampered by the lack of official attention and lack of resources (both of which have been allocated to solving other social problems such as combating organized crime and drugs).²¹ Mexican officials are reluctant to provide an estimate of revenue from prostitution and sex tourism. Gathering accurate estimates is difficult, in large part, because of the involvement of organized crime and DTOs.

The Mexican border is also a center for child sex tourism. Thousands of pedophiles and situational offenders from the United States and other western countries cross into Mexico daily looking for cheap sex with underage prostitutes. These child sex tourists are a mixed lot. While some are pedophiles that preferentially seek out children for sexual relationships, many child sex tourists are “situational abusers.” These are individuals who do not consistently seek out children as sexual partners, but who do occasionally engage in sexual acts with children when the opportunity presents itself.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, “Some perpetrators rationalize their sexual encounters with children with the idea that they are helping the children financially better themselves and their families. Paying a child for his or her services allows a tourist to avoid guilt by convincing himself he is helping the child and the child's family to escape economic hardship. Others try to justify their behavior by reasoning that children in foreign countries are less “sexually inhibited,” and through the belief that their destination country does not have the same social taboos against having sex with children. Still other perpetrators are drawn towards child sex while abroad because they enjoy the anonymity that comes with being in a foreign land.”²²

The bottom line, however, is that sex tourists are no different than child molesters and other sex offenders. They may rationalize their actions based on the circumstances of the child and the foreign location, but at the

end of the day, like all child predators, they are motivated by their own need for self-gratification. The circumstances merely allow them to live out a fantasy not available to them elsewhere.

An estimated 16,000 children are currently involved in prostitution, pornography and sex-tourism in Mexico.²³ Child prostitutes live in constant fear: they live in fear of sadistic acts by clients, fear of being beaten by pimps who control their lives, and fear of being apprehended by the police. Victims often suffer from depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of hopelessness. Suicide rates among these youth are triple the national averages. In addition, children in prostitution face constant problems of possible pregnancy, complications of childbirth, violence, alcohol and drug addiction, and sexually transmitted diseases including HIV-AIDS.

Children are increasingly falling into the hands of the child prostitution and pornography networks that are associated with the DTOs/cartels. One of the key differences between the drug trade and the sex trade, however, is that people can be "used" over and over again, while a drug can only be consumed once. As a result, it is in the best interest of the cartels to keep those in captivity under their complete control, sometimes for years. If a girl becomes pregnant or sick, or is arrested, or dies, it is in the best interest of her traffickers to quickly replace her.

It is ironic that the violence related to drug trafficking on the border is increasingly cutting into the profits of the cartels' border sex tourism and pornography enterprises. Mexican officials have recently reported a dramatic decrease in sex tourists on the border as a result of the drug war between rival cartels in the area. Although border violence has impacted operations, the cartels are not deterred, and they continue to smuggle girls into the U.S.²⁴

Most investigators and service providers agree that the societal factor that pushes children into prostitution in Mexico is poverty. Latin American nations with thriving sex tourism industries are nations that suffer from widespread poverty resulting from turbulent politics and unstable economies. Poverty often correlates with illiteracy, limited employment opportunities, and bleak financial circumstances for families. Children in these families become targets for procurement agents in search of young children. They are lured away from broken homes by "recruiters," who promise them jobs in a city and then force them into prostitution.

Sadly, some families prostitute their children or sell their children into the sex trade. Although street and orphaned children are particularly vulnerable to trafficking into the sex industry, a large percentage of

children who have been trafficked continue living with their families and engage in commercial sex activity in order to contribute to household income.

The Internet has also facilitated the recent rise in child sex tourism by providing a marketing channel. Websites provide potential child sex tourists with pornographic accounts written by other child sex tourists. The easy availability of this information on the Internet generates interest in child sex tourism and facilitates child sex abusers in making their travel plans.

SBI—Working to Combat Child Exploitation on the Border

Local legislators, nonprofit organizations and surviving families of abduction victims have advocated for serious improvements in the ability of Mexican officials to protect victims of abductions, trafficking and exploitation. U.S. officials complain about the complexities of investigating cases which originate in Mexico or in which victims from the United States are taken into Mexico. Confusing laws, jurisdictional issues and communications barriers are daunting hurdles for their efforts to protect children on the border.

Mexican officials also face their own problems in protecting children, including a lack of resources and severe internal security issues. These have made it difficult for them to intake, respond to, or investigate child exploitation cases with the same degree of attention that they receive in the United States.

The mission of the Southern Border Initiative of the AMBER Alert Project is to assist in developing solutions for these problems. The success of the AMBER Alert initiative in the United States has generated considerable interest in Mexico, and a number of Mexican state and federal agencies are beginning to develop similar child recovery models in their respective regions.

In an effort to develop a comprehensive strategy for addressing issues related to cross-border abductions, exploitation, and trafficking, officials from Mexico have been meeting with officials from the United States and SBI for the past five years. These efforts are taking place despite the personal risk to Mexican officials who face competing demands of state security and the struggle with drug cartels in their states.

Since its inception, the Southern Border Initiative has seen strong support in Mexican Border States. The states of Tamaulipas and Baja California have adopted statewide child recovery programs, while regional programs modeled on the AMBER Alert program are in place in Monterrey in the state of Nuevo Leon, and Ciudad Juarez in Chihuahua.

In February of 2009, representatives of six Mexican states, the Mexican federal government and municipal agencies met with officials from U.S. state, local, and federal agencies to develop strategies for implementation of cross-border training programs for officials from both countries.

The goal of this cross-border training project is to enable both U.S. and Mexican personnel to develop a greater understanding of the issues surrounding cross-border abductions and human trafficking on the border, while also increasing cooperation, joint response and investigative capabilities. Through the efforts of the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, a number of promising initiatives such as joint training, open communications and capacity building in Mexico have been put into place which are designed to protect children and help communities on both sides of the border.

A February 2011 meeting with Mexican federal officials held in Mexico City was designed to move the program to the next level--to combine the grassroots efforts of the states and region with the support and oversight of the federal government. This meeting, which was hosted by the U.S. Department of Justice Resident Legal Advisor to Mexico was unique in that United States experts in child abduction and exploitation from SBI began the process of partnering with their Mexican federal counterparts to design procedures and programs to aid in the recovery of abducted, endangered and missing children on both sides of the border.

The challenge of this ongoing bilateral effort is to work together in developing a comprehensive child recovery strategy, which will ultimately eliminate the border as an obstacle to protecting children.

Policy Recommendations

1. Develop and provide training and awareness programs directed at law enforcement and other services providers (Fire, EMS, Social Services, school systems, etc.,) on recognition of and response to trafficking.
2. Conduct training for local law enforcement, prosecutors and judges on model programs for interdiction, investigations, prosecution, and prevention.
3. Develop programs targeting juveniles at high risk for victimization and exploitation, with the goal being to intervene, redirect and support runaway, throwaway and exploited children who are at risk of trafficking, or who are being exploited.

4. Develop public service programs to reach out to victims of trafficking, educating the victim on their rights and protections, with the aim of increasing the number of self-referrals and rescues.
5. Create collaborative programs on the Southern border to build the capabilities of United States and Mexican officials to combat trafficking, sex tourism and exploitation.
6. Create teams of researchers, journalists, social service groups, advocacy groups, and law enforcement to develop "on-the-ground" and "real time" information relating to strategies employed by traffickers, numbers of victims being trafficked, and to develop comprehensive understanding of sex trafficking as it is inter-related to labor trafficking, drug trafficking, and other organized criminal enterprises.

Conclusions

Child sexual trafficking or exploitation is just one of the many complex problems that have arisen in the troubling political, legal, economic, social, and human rights context of the U.S-Mexico border. It is a crime that is not often highlighted, being, by its very nature, one that relies on secrecy, and exists in the shadows. Nevertheless, the SBI, child advocacy organizations, law enforcement groups, human rights activists and researchers, the media, religious organizations, governments, and others are coming to terms with the extent of the problem and the tragic reality of a generation of children being commodified, exploited, and victimized on the border. These groups are shining a bright spotlight on the issue and are gearing up for the battle to eradicate it.

There are daunting challenges, to be sure. The effort is hampered by failures to recognize trafficking victims, by inadequate resources to adequately investigate or prosecute perpetrators, by victims who are unwilling or too frightened to cooperate, by insufficient statutory frameworks, by complex jurisdictional issues and by shortages of educational and training opportunities.

There are also signs of hope. The Southern Border Initiative is successfully continuing to work to unify law enforcement's response to abductions and exploitation across the border and at all levels of government on each side of the border. Research is being carried out to provide realistic numbers regarding the extent of the problem. Media campaigns are being launched to inform the public. Finally, groups dedicated to ending child sexual exploitation on the border are beginning to form partnerships, like the one represented in this paper, to share knowledge, extend networks, increase funding, and provide mutual

support. All of these efforts hold promise, and all will contribute to a larger and more comprehensive perspective on this multi-dimensional and tragic, but no longer invisible, problem.

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