Child Abuse & Neglect 52 (2016) 158–168

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Child Abuse & Neglect

Research article

Challenges to the rapid identification of children who have been trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 4 September 2015
Received in revised form
20 November 2015
Accepted 21 November 2015
Available online 22 December 2015

Keywords:
Child trafficking
Commercial sexual exploitation

ABSTRACT

Child trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) is a complex phenomenon, requiring multifaceted programs and policies by various stakeholders. A number of publications have focused on preventing this heinous crime. Less attention, however, has been paid to the recovery and rehabilitation of children who have been traumatized as a result of being trafficked for CSE. This article focuses on the first step in the protection and recovery process, which is to ensure that procedures are in place for their identification, so that they might access timely and appropriate assistance. It highlights three situational and two child-related challenges to identification. In addition, it describes the additional victimization experienced by children who are wrongly arrested for crimes associated with prostitution or illegal border crossings, rather than being identified as victims. An extensive literature review was conducted, and included academic publications, as well as governmental and non-governmental reports. In addition, field-based qualitative research was undertaken in South and Southeast Asia, and involved interviews with representatives from United Nations and governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and aftercare recovery programs.

The first step in the recovery process for child victims of trafficking is to ensure that procedures are in place for their rapid detection to facilitate timely and appropriate assistance (Abu-Ali & Al-Bahar, 2011; Brunovskis & Surtees, 2012a). Identification relies on those who come into contact with victims being aware of the issues surrounding trafficking, and the importance of their proactive action (Alvarez & Alessi, 2012; Hodge, 2014). When children are identified, it is often by police or immigration officials (Aborisade & Aderinto, 2008; Brunovskis & Surtees, 2012a; Gjermeni et al., 2008; Macy & Graham, 2012). Despite the existence of obligations and policies to ensure their identification, most victims of child trafficking are not formally identified through official channels (Greenbaum, 2014; Okech, Morreau, & Benson, 2011; Rigby, 2011). Many children who are not identified continue to have their human rights violated, and the protection services they so desperately need are not provided (Bokhari, 2008; Gozdziak & MacDonnell, 2007). In addition, traffickers continue to exploit, and their crimes are neither documented nor prosecuted (Rafferty, 2013a; Reid, 2013; Shaw, 2013).

This article highlights situational and child-related challenges to the timely identification of children who have been trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation (CSE). The situational challenges include: the changing face of child trafficking; governments have not taken full ownership of the problem; and lack of awareness by those who come in contact with victims. The child-related challenges include: psychological barriers; and their wish not to be identified. Identification failures, and the additional victimization experienced by children who are not appropriately identified as victims, are also discussed.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.11.015
0145-2134/

Methodology

This article weaves together information collected through an extensive review of the literature on child trafficking for CSE with additional information collected during interviews with field-based personnel in South and South-East Asia. The literature reviewed was extensive and included academic publications, as well as governmental and non-governmental reports. Journal articles were identified through a comprehensive review of the literature using various relevant social science databases, including EBSCO, ERIC, PsychINFO, PsychARTICLES, ProQuest, MEDLINE, SocIndex, and Google Scholar. Some articles were identified through a general search of the databases listed above and others were found through the reference lists of relevant publications. Government and non-government reports unavailable on scholarly databases were identified through Google searches, websites linked with the United Nations (U.N.), archival records on government websites, and the websites of international providers of aftercare services for children who have been trafficked. Additional noteworthy documents were identified during various forums which I attended as a representative of a non-governmental organization (NGO) at the U.N. Lastly, reports were identified during interviews with key informants (described below). The final selection of articles and reports relevant to the topic of identification methods included 77 publications, ranging from 1989 to 2014. These publications were used to develop a summary of key barriers to identification of child victims of CSE, and to enable me to frame the relevant topics to include in my interview protocol described below.

Information collected through the literature review was further explored during field-based interviews conducted during my year long sabbatical (2013–2014), which included visits to Cambodia, India, Laos, Nepal, Thailand, and Vietnam. Informants included representatives from governments, U.N. agencies, NGOs, and aftercare recovery programs. The criteria for recruiting interviewees were not scientific (e.g., a random sampling of agencies and/or personnel). In view of the challenges this would present, a sample of convenience was obtained. I began by attempting to elicit support in advance of my travels from various U.N. agencies, including U.N. Women, UNICEF, International Labour Organization (ILO), and the International Office for Migration (IOM). In addition, I contacted the major international NGOs involved with the provision of aftercare services for child victims (e.g., ECPAT: End Child Trafficking and Prostitution; International Justice Mission; Friends International, World Vision). Both U.N. and NGO representatives were informed of my project and asked for their assistance contacting field-based personnel who were involved with child trafficking. In response to my request, I was provided with names and contact information for key personnel involved with aftercare programs in various countries. They included at least one U.N. staff member in each country ($n = 10$) and 20 representatives from NGOs. These representatives were subsequently contacted (via e-mail) and an opportunity to meet with them while I was in their respective countries was requested. Meetings were subsequently arranged with each person contacted ($n = 30$), or their designated representative. These key informants, in turn, introduced me to field-based staff in various locations. Overall, I met with 213 people from the six countries and included representatives from U.N. agencies ($n = 22$), governments ($n = 12$), and aftercare programs ($n = 179$).

Interview protocols were developed in advance and focused on (a) identification; (b) service needs; (c) intake and assessment procedures; (d) interim and psychosocial support; and (e) continuing care and reintegration. Prior to my departure, I had obtained informed consent for my interview questions from my University affiliation, and I had hoped to get each interviewee to respond to a series of questions and prompts. It was difficult, however, to adhere to the protocol given time constraints of the interviewees. Some interviews lasted for 10 min; others lasted for an hour or two. In some cases, individual interviews were conducted. In other cases, the structure was much less formal and involved a group meeting of two or more people. Some interviewees were extremely knowledgeable with many years of experience (e.g., regional representatives for U.N. agencies or executives from International NGOs), although all interviewees had pertinent information to offer. Despite the challenges, everyone was supportive of the research project and welcomed my quest for information about identification challenges (and other issues associated with aftercare programs that are covered in other articles). In each case, informants were asked to describe the specific barriers to the timely identification of child victims. This information was subsequently expanded upon, by highlighting specific findings from the research literature. These pieces of information were then put together to get a complete picture of the entire issue. In addition, some key informants provided me with supplemental literature that expanded upon issues discussed during the interview. This article weaves together the barriers that had been previously identified in the research literature with information obtained from key informants, including the supplemental literature they provided. The information collected and presented here will provide a vital base for future research on this often overlooked topic involving the psychosocial recovery of child victims of trafficking.

Findings

Situational challenges to timely identification

In the past, discussion of factors associated with identification of victims of child trafficking have focused on: (a) the clandestine nature of the crime; (b) the fact that it is a criminal activity and lawmakers and public officials find it difficult to acknowledge the magnitude of the problem; (c) uncoordinated data collection and statistics ridden with methodological problems, making it hard to evaluate the validity and reliability of available data; and (d) the lack of a precise, consistent, unambiguous and standard operating definitions as to what constitutes the act of trafficking, trafficker, trafficked person and child (cf. Rafferty, 2013a, 2013b). Although these challenges remain, information obtained from the field-based interviews suggests that the environment of CSE has shifted somewhat and the increasingly clandestine nature of the crime