



Services to domestic minor victims of sex trafficking: Opportunities for engagement and support



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ABSTRACT

Human trafficking of young people is a social problem of growing concern. This paper reports selected findings from an evaluation of three programs serving domestic minor victims of human trafficking. Participants in this study were funded to identify and serve male and female victims of sex or labor trafficking who were less than 18 years old and were U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents. Programs provided case management and comprehensive services, either directly or through community collaboration. Evaluation data included data on client characteristics, service needs and services delivered; key informant interviews with program staff and partner agencies; and case narrative interviews in which program staff provided in-depth descriptions of clients' histories. All clients served were known or believed to be sex trafficked. The majority of clients needed crisis intervention, safety planning, educational support, mental health services, and employment services. Although they were diverse in terms of demographics and circumstances, two common patterns were of homeless young people exchanging sex to meet survival needs and young people were emotionally engaged with their trafficker. Key findings include the diversity of trafficked minors, the challenge of initial and continued engagement with service delivery, the structural and resource barriers to long-term support for young people, and the potential contribution of programs specifically addressing trafficked minors. A framework linking services to young people's circumstances and outcome areas is proposed.

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1. Introduction

Human trafficking of young people is a social problem of growing concern. Within the United States, the existence of trafficking is well established, yet not well understood (Schwartz, 2009). The authorization of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) in 2000 firmly endorsed a victim-centered approach to young people who are trafficked (U.S. Department of State, 2013). The TVPA defines a person under the age of 18 who is involved in a commercial sex act as a victim of sex trafficking, regardless of whether force, fraud, or coercion is involved. A commercial sex act is further defined as one in which anything of value is given to or received by any person,¹ such that acts performed in exchange for shelter, food or protection are considered trafficking. Labor trafficking, as defined by the TVPA, is 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.

Estimates of the number of sex trafficked minors vary widely, reflecting the data source, definitions and methodologies used. One review noted estimates ranging from 1400 to 2.4 million, but urged readers not to cite these numbers because “scientifically credible estimates do not exist” (Stransky & Finkelhor, 2008, p. 1). Young people trafficked for sex are not homogenous; all classes, races, genders, and sexualities are represented. Some research suggests that more boys than girls are involved (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2004; Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1999; Schaffner, 2006). Other studies indicate more girls than boys, and some assert that the numbers are equal (Estes & Weiner, 2005). The complexity lies in part in the diverse behaviors involved. The most frequently described scenarios include trading sex for basic needs (Adler, 2003); engaging in pimp-controlled sex trades (Estes & Weiner, 2005; Herrmann, 1987; Weisberg, 1984); performing in pornographic films (Estes & Weiner, 2005; Herrmann, 1987); and, among girls, servicing gang members and their affiliates (Estes & Weiner, 2005). A random sample of minor prostitution arrests found that most (57%) involved a third-party exploiter, 31% involved no third-party exploiter, and the remaining 12% involved familial exploitation (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2010).

Sex trafficked minors are frequently involved in foster care and child welfare services, as well as the juvenile justice system. It has been estimated that 85% of girls involved in sex trades come from homes

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¹ 22.U.S.C. § 7102(3).

involved with the child welfare system (Kotrla, 2010). Within their families, these minors have frequently experienced physical and sexual abuse (Alvarez, 2010; Brawn & Roe-Sepowitz, 2008; Estes & Weiner, 2005; Harris, Scott, & Skidmore, 2006; Kotrla, 2010; Schwartz, 2009; Unger et al., 1998; Weisberg, 1984). Also commonly reported are neglect and emotional abuse (Alvarez, 2010; Harris et al., 2006; The Skillman Foundation, 2002); parental alcohol and drug use problems (Harris et al., 2006; Unger et al., 1998); and chaotic, ineffective parenting (Brawn & Roe-Sepowitz, 2008; The Skillman Foundation, 2002). A survey of 97 New York agencies that encounter young people in the sex trade found that 48% of the young people identified as commercially sexually exploited had involvement in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems (Gragg, Petta, Bernstein, Eisen, & Quinn, 2007). Additionally, young people are at particular risk for trafficking if they run away from home or reside in a child welfare placement (Badawy, 2010; Brawn & Roe-Sepowitz, 2008; Caplan, 1984; CdeBaca, 2010; Kotrla, 2010; Weisberg, 1984), or are pushed out of their homes ('throwaways') for reasons that may include sexual orientation or gender identity (Schaffner, 2006; Unger et al., 1998).

Numerous federal agencies and action groups have addressed the issue of minor victim trafficking. The *Federal Strategic Action Plan* describes actions planned by federal agencies to identify and serve trafficking victims (President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor & Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2013). Guidance from Administration for Children, Youth and Families summarizes priorities for screening, service coordination and intervention by youth-serving agencies (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth & Families (ACYF), 2013), including organizations serving runaway and homeless youth and child welfare systems. Finally, an expert work group convened by the National Academy of Science advanced recommendations to increase awareness and understanding, strengthen legal response, develop prevention and intervention strategies, support collaboration and share information, based on an exhaustive review of research and best practice (Clayton, Krugman, & Simon, 2013).

Increased public awareness of trafficking during recent years has contributed to growing attention to the circumstances of minors engaged in commercial sex. However, the terminology of "trafficking" may create confusion for individuals who may interpret it as describing movement across national borders. With respect to minors, the term *sex trafficking* is equivalent to *commercial sexual exploitation of children* (CSEC) (Clayton et al., 2013). In this article, we use the former term, consistent with the TVPA legal definition, interchangeably with *sex trade engagement*, which more specifically describes the activity. We also use the term *facilitator*, as opposed to *pimp* or *trafficker*, to refer to an individual who arranges sex trades for another, with or without financial benefit. This term encompasses the diversity of relationships between facilitators and young people.

This paper reports selected findings from an evaluation of three programs funded by the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) at the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) to identify and serve domestic minor victims of human trafficking. We used qualitative interviews and program data to describe clients served, in terms of their characteristics and service needs. To summarize these data, we give particular attention to two subgroups of trafficked young people: homeless youth meeting survival needs, and those who are emotionally engaged by a facilitator. These youth represent distinct patterns of trafficking involvement and challenges of service delivery. From these diverse programs, we identify several lessons learned with respect to service delivery. In addition, we offer a framework that links young people's circumstances, service needs and outcome areas for consideration within future program development.

2. Methods

Participants in this study were three programs funded by OVC to identify and serve male and female victims of either sex or labor

trafficking, who were less than 18 years old and were U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents. The programs were diverse in history, organization, referral sources and service delivery approach. The Standing Against Global Exploitation Everywhere (SAGE) Project, located in San Francisco, served adults and youth affected by sexual exploitation. Prior to the OVC grant, SAGE provided life skills programs, advocacy, counseling and case management for girls, including those in the juvenile justice systems. The Salvation Army Trafficking Outreach Program and Intervention Techniques (STOP-IT) program, located in Chicago, was founded by The Salvation Army and grew from that organization's engagement in local trafficking task forces. Under the OVC grant, STOP-IT expanded their services from foreign trafficking victims to domestic youth engaged in sex trades. The Streetwork Project at Safe Horizon, located in New York City, serves homeless and street-involved youth with drop-in centers, temporary housing, counseling, health care, legal advocacy and other services, offered by Streetwork staff and co-located providers. Trafficking victims thus represented the primary focus of SAGE and STOP-IT, but a very small proportion of the thousands of young people served annually at Streetwork.

Each program was required to provide intensive case management that included intake, needs assessment, development of individualized plans, referrals, documentation of service provision, and routine follow-up. Programs were also expected to offer a comprehensive service model, either directly or through partners. Required services included housing; physical, mental, and dental health care; criminal justice advocacy; specialized educational services; and transportation. SAGE served clients through a combination of individual case management and group programs in its downtown office. STOP-IT worked entirely through one-on-one case management meetings, held in clients' homes or neutral locations such as fast-food restaurants. Streetwork provided services through its drop-in centers and shelter. Although all programs offered referrals to services not provided by their own staff, Streetwork was able to offer many more services in-house, through a medical van, psychiatrist and legal advocate with scheduled hours at the drop in centers.

The evaluation of the OVC-funded programs was sponsored by the National Institutes of Justice (NIJ), also at DOJ. The evaluation was designed as a process evaluation because understanding of service delivery for this population is still at an early stage. Therefore, the evaluation focused on describing the characteristics of minor trafficking victims and their service needs, documenting services delivered, and understanding programs' experiences with service delivery. The evaluation was also structured to be participatory in order to build practice knowledge by rapidly channeling evaluation data back to programs in order to inform service delivery. The evaluation team collaborated with the three programs to develop data collection plans and instruments, using multiple data sources to document program operations between January 2011 and June 2013.

Program staff compiled data on clients and services using three forms. The Intake Status form collected information on each client's demographic characteristics, social service system involvement, sex trade experiences, living situation, health information, trauma history, and service needs. The Client Service Needs and Service Provision form described the services needed and provided to each client, and was completed monthly for each active client. The Closing Status form captured the reasons for closing the case on each client who explicitly left the program, or whose case was considered closed because of lack of contact with the program.

Program staff shipped completed forms to the evaluation team each month, after removing or recoding any identifying information. The evaluation team entered the data into an analysis file, prepared a summary of clients served and service provided for the program, and developed cross-site analysis files. Given the modest number of young people served, analyses consisted of straightforward descriptive statistics, with some tests of significance for differences among programs.

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