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How Does the Perception of Human Trafficking Victims by Different Agencies Affect the Different Detection Protocols and Procedures when Interacting with Victims?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to understand how the perception of agencies that may interact with human trafficking affects protocols and procedures that are put in place. To answer this question, a qualitative study was conducted. I interviewed nine respondents who worked for five different agencies ranging from child services to the DA's office. Respondents' perception of human trafficking victims was in line with the literature. However, there appear to be specific gaps in Abilene when it comes to detecting and providing housing for victims of human trafficking.

How Does the Perception of Human Trafficking Victims by Different Agencies Affect
the Different Detection Protocols and Procedures when Interacting with Victims?

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Social Work

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science in Social Work

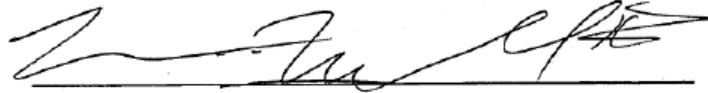
By

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This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Joshua Meribole, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Science in Social Work



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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking, as described by the United States (US) Department of Homeland Security, is a crime that “involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act” (Department of Homeland Security, n.d, What is Human Trafficking Section, para. 1). To combat human trafficking, the United States passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA). The TVPA heralded an era of new state and federal laws that mandate training law enforcement, increasing penalties for those who benefit from exploiting others, increase training across different government agencies, and educating agencies about human trafficking prevention and intervention methods.

The purpose of human trafficking, according to the U.N., is exploitation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.). Exploitation is at the heart of the human trafficking concept (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). Exploitation can take many forms, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, forced domestic service, forced organ donation, and forced military service (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.). Low or no wages combined with high mobility to increase the potential for exploiting vulnerable people (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). Human trafficking is a global problem that encompasses many different countries. However, what human trafficking victims look like can be different. For example, in particular parts of the world, human trafficking involves the use of child soldiers or the use of brothels. In the United States, human

trafficking might look like someone—male or female—forced to have sex with a third party, produce pornographic material, or work at a farm or restaurant with little or no pay.

Human trafficking can be broken up into two segments: labor trafficking and sex trafficking. Labor trafficking is the exploitation of individuals for free or reduced compensation, while sex trafficking involves exploiting people for sex. Labor and sex trafficking can include people from different races and age groups. People usually become human trafficking victims because of the “threat of or use of force, deception, coercion, abuse of power or position of vulnerability” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d, What is Human Trafficking? Section, para. 2). According to the U.N., “Human Trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, intending to exploit them for profit” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d, Human Trafficking Section, para. 1). When people become trafficked, it can be hard to leave due to threats of violence, addiction, instability, etc.

The number of human trafficking victims globally is hard to estimate, but organizations like the International Labor Organization (ILO) put the number in the millions (Logan et al., 2009). In the United States, the number of human trafficking victims is unknown, with estimates ranging from thousands to millions (the significant disparity in the estimates of human trafficking will be discussed further in later in this thesis). Although the number of human trafficking victims in the United states is hard to quantify, Texas is hypothesized to be one of the states with the highest number of human trafficking victims because it is a commercial hub with five major cities, it borders four states and one country, and it has several interstate highways (Lemke, 2018). In addition,

Texas hosts various major sporting and entertainment events, which can be an attraction for human traffickers (Lemke, 2018). The purpose of this study is to better understand how frontline workers' perception of human trafficking victims influences the procedures and protocols that they put in place to help victims.

In this literature review, I will be looking at the current literature to get a better understanding of what sex trafficking is, who the victims of sex trafficking are in the United States, and the operations of agencies that have common interaction with victims of sex trafficking. Sex trafficking victims in the United States commonly interact with nurses, hospitals, police officers, foster care workers, and school personnel. For this reason, my literature review will be focused on frontline workers—police, the foster care system, and the juvenile justice system—and how their perception of human trafficking victims affects the procedures and protocols that are put in place to help victims of human trafficking.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perception of Human Trafficking

Although it has been over 20 years since the TVPA, which defined what human trafficking is in the U.S., human trafficking is still not properly understood among the wide population of Americans. According to a study done in 2014, 92% of participants had an incorrect view of human trafficking, and 71% believed that *human smuggling* is another word for *human trafficking* (Bouche et al., 2015). In addition, when looking at a range of studies about human trafficking, Virkus (2014) discovered that participants tended to view trafficking victims the ideal victim, and placed blame on victims of trafficking. One study that looked at nurses' perceptions of human trafficking victims found that although nurses felt that victims of human trafficking would have similar characteristics to those who suffer domestic violence, they believed that victims would primarily be foreign born young women (Long & Dowdell, 2018).

Research shows that public knowledge and perception of human trafficking victims is heavily influenced by media (Virkus, 2014). According to Virkus (2014), the reason for this is that a lot of people do not have experience with the crime and are dependent on the media for information regarding human trafficking. In a 2016 study, Austin (2016) showed that media outlets commonly portray victims of human trafficking as white and female. Movies such as *Taken* highlight victims who have been kidnapped, who are white, and who are from eastern European countries (Austin, 2016). The

problem with this portrayal is that the coercive process that a trafficker might use is ignored. Coercion can include lying or luring victims with false promises or threats.

People who are trafficked might not be viewed as innocent by the public. One reason for this is that many young adolescents who are engaged in prostitution are street smart and understand sexual related work (Menaker & Franklin, 2013). Another reason is that human trafficking victims who are of a minority population might be perceived of as “...seductive, hypersexual, manipulative with men, and exploitative of male weakness” (Menaker & Franklin, 2013, p.7). Many African-American victims are “accused of provoking or even desiring her [their] own sexual victimization” (Menaker & Franklin, 2013, p.7). This perception can lead to minority populations not being considered victims of human trafficking by the public or frontline workers.

People who engage in prostitution can be viewed as either victims who are deserving of help, or as offenders who should be punished. In the public eye, moral values, appearance, and living conditions are defined by internal forces rather than external ones (Menaker & Franklin, 2013). Therefore, the public generally views those who presumably engage in illegal actions as culpable.

Currently, the law states that, for any child under the age 18 who is being trafficked, the requirement of force, fraud, or coercion, does not need to be met. A child, by law is already perceived to be a victim. In the U.S. there has been a push to change the perception of victims. Menaker and Franklin (2013) found that the presence of a victim’s history can change how people assign blame to the victims

Because prostitution is illegal in many states, there has been a push to pass safe harbor laws. These are laws that aim to make sure that juveniles cannot be prosecuted for

prostitution. One of the main goals of these policies is to move juvenile youth from the justice system to the child welfare system. For example, in Texas, a person under the age of 14 cannot be charged with prostitution (Lemke, 2018). However, for adults the perception of either being seen as a victim or a criminal can play a huge part in terms of how they get aid. How victims of human trafficking are seen is important because it can impact the aid provided by frontline workers. Therefore, understanding how victims of human trafficking are viewed – as either victims or if they are blamed for their circumstance can influence how they are treated by frontline workers.

Shortcoming in Understanding the Scope of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is a global, multidimensional phenomenon that is likely perceived (i.e., defined, recognized, and understood) by the public in a manner that is dependent on numerous variables. A partial listing of those variables includes the clarity with which the human trafficking problem is defined, the breadth of understanding of the problem definition within the public, and the degree of importance the public assigns to this problem. The perception and understanding of what human trafficking is among major stakeholders influences how victims are identified and subsequently treated. Without widespread acceptance of a clear problem definition and a widespread sense of urgency for addressing the human trafficking, the likelihood of involving key stakeholders in trying to reduce the impacts of human trafficking are low.

While being trafficked, victims often interact with systems that could provide help (e.g., the child welfare system, hospitals, law enforcement, the justice system, etc.). However, because of a pervasive failure across many public welfare systems to recognize victims of human trafficking as victims, the amount of assistance provided to victims

remains small. Recognition of human trafficking victims is further complicated by the complexity of the phenomenon. In one study about the experience of sex trafficking victims, a survivor of sex trafficking said, “even people who were aware of sex trafficking did not fully understand the complexity of the issue, and the involvement of drugs, manipulation, and violence in sex trafficking” (Rajaram & Tidball, 2018, p. 3). The participants discussed interactions with the justice systems like the police and health care system that did not seem to have any knowledge of the trauma that the women experienced. The lack of awareness and the perception held by frontline workers increased the mistrust that they had in the system (Rajaram & Tidball, 2018). The interactions between frontline workers and sex trafficking victims will be explored further in this literature review.

Therefore, obtaining reliable and valid estimates of the scope, severity, and social costs of human trafficking is difficult (McGough, 2013). In the United States, estimates of the number of human trafficking victims are inconsistent (McGough, 2013). Busch-Armendariz (2016) estimated that in 2016 the number of human trafficking victims in Texas was 313,000. Of these, 234,000 were estimated to be victims of labor trafficking, and 79,000 were child or youth victims of sex trafficking (Busch-Armendariz, 2016). Researchers such as McGough (2013) reveal the difficulties in finding out a close estimate of human trafficking. For example, according to the National Human trafficking hotline, in 2019, 11,500 victims of human trafficking were reported in the United States. In Texas, in 2016, the National Trafficking Hotline stated that the number of reported cases to be 681, which greatly differs from the number of victims of human trafficking victim reported by the Busch-Armendariz (National Human trafficking Hotline, n.d.;

Busch-Armendariz, 2016). In 2019, the National Human hotline reported 1,080 cases of human trafficking (National Human Trafficking Hotline, n.d.). According to the Human Trafficking Institutes, in 2020, there were 1,007 defendants in 579 active cases of human trafficking, with 1,499 victims of human trafficking (Ecker, 2021). This means that when it comes to the counting or getting an estimate on the number of human trafficking victims, there is currently no definitive number.

Aside from lack of widespread knowledge or acceptance of a definition of human trafficking, there are other reasons that likely account for differences in prevalence estimates of human trafficking. Considerable heterogeneity exists among demographic characteristics of and/or risk factors for becoming human trafficking victims (e.g., people who have experience sexual or physical abuse, runaway children, impoverished illegal immigrants, impoverished residents, etc.). In addition, a wide variety of human trafficking methods exist (e.g., familial, force, coercion, extortion, etc.), and some methods are much less obvious than others. Human trafficking takes numerous forms (e.g., domestic servitude, forced labor, forced prostitution, etc.). Perhaps one of the biggest obstacles to accurate identification of human trafficking victims is the degree of culpability that the public assigns to various subgroups of human trafficking victims.

Heterogeneity of Human Trafficking Victims

There are different types of sex trafficking victims and there are many reasons why a person might become a trafficking victim. However, there are some indicators that show an increased risk of human trafficking for a certain population in the U.S. with certain experiences. The age of entry into human trafficking is usually between the ages of 12 and 14 (Hammond & McGlone, 2014). The most common indicators that a child or

adult is at risk of being trafficked for sex include family dysfunction; being sexually abused; problems at school; poverty; drug; and alcohol use; being in the foster care system; having friends or family members that are part of the sex industry; running away from home; and being homeless (Klatt et al., 2014). Although victims can vary across different socioeconomic backgrounds, a common trait is that they have experienced adverse childhood experiences (Hammond & McGlone, 2014).

Categories and Methods of Sex Traffickers

Many different demographic categories of traffickers exist (e.g., friends, family members, boyfriends, pimps, gorilla pimps, etc.). A trafficker can be anybody and is often somebody with whom the victim is well acquainted. Family members, such as a mother or siblings, can influence other family members to enter the sex industry in order to obtain money or drugs (Reed et al., 2019). When minors run from their home or leave a government-run facility, they become vulnerable to traffickers. According to studies, youth are frequently approached by other trafficked youth to be trafficked (Moore et al., 2020). In one study, 44% to 68% of youth were recruited to the sex industry by their friends (Moore et al., 2020). However, more research is needed to know the extent to which friends can play a role in the recruitment of other youth into the sex industry (Reed et al., 2019). In several studies of human traffickers, most of the traffickers were men (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Moore et al., 2020). For example, in one study men made up to 72% of traffickers, while women made up of 20% and traffickers that included both men and women were an estimated 12% (Moore et al., 2020). In the case of family trafficking, women appeared to be the primary traffickers. However, more research is needed to know if this is a trend.

Recruitment Process

During the recruitment process, traffickers frequently isolate victims from their families. Participants are often recruited into the sex trafficking industry before the age of 18 (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014). Traffickers often exploit the vulnerability and the needs of their child victims by appearing to be kind and loving. In one study, for example, participants came from families where their caregiver paid them little attention, or where they were sexually abused by a member of their family (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014). One participant described how the trafficker appealed to her need for affection by buying her items such as clothing and jewelry (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014).

Another common route of recruitment begins as a romantic relationship. Boyfriends, who become pimps, frequently use either coercion or violence to persuade the victim to engage in prostitution (Reed et al., 2019). Victims often endure severe beatings and/or psychological manipulation that ironically increase their willingness to engage in prostitution to try to please the “boyfriend pimp.” According to Moore (2020), 16% of trafficking victims considered being in an intimate relationship with their trafficker, and 25% said their trafficker was their boyfriend (Moore et al., 2020). Although the pimps are aware that they are exploiting the victims, victims might still believe they are in a loving relationship.

Abuse and Trauma Bonding

In a study by Lederer and Wetzel (2014), 95.1% of human trafficking victims experienced different forms of abuse. Of these, 81.6% were forced to have sex, 73.8% were punched, 68.9% were beaten, 68.0% were kicked, 66.0% were threatened with a weapon, and 54.4% were strangled. Both underage and adult victims are often forced to

have sexual intercourse with as many as 40 people per week (Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2014). In addition, victims of human trafficking are sometimes encouraged or forced to abuse psychoactive substances. In one study, 84.3% of participants indicated they had abused a substance (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014). In the study by Cecchet and Thoburn, participants discussed being injected with drugs by force (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014).

Studies show that people who have been trafficked can develop what is known as a *trauma bond*, which is often referred to as *Stockholm syndrome*. *Trauma bonding* occurs when trafficked victims develop an emotional attachment to their abuser. The stages of trauma bonding include: “(a) perceived threat to one’s physical and psychological survival at the hands of an abuser, (b) perceived kindness from the abuser to the victim, (c) isolation, and (d) inability to escape” (Casassa et al., 2021, p. 2). Trauma bonding creates a number of difficulties for assisting trauma victims. Ironically, the repeated physical, sexual, and psychological abuse experienced by the victim at the hands of the perpetrator seems to strengthen the attachment to the perpetrator. Rather than wanting to flee the abusive and exploitative relationship, the trauma-bonded victim will actually go to great lengths to please and protect the perpetrator. Out of this desire to please the perpetrator, the trauma-bonded trafficking victim willingly engages in prostitution (Reed et al., 2019).

Familial Sex Trafficking

Although there are victims who are vulnerable to trafficking once they leave home, children can also be trafficked inside their homes. This is sometimes referred to as familial sex trafficking. In some studies, an estimated 12% of trafficked victims were trafficked by a family member (Sprang & Cole, 2018). However, such estimates are

likely inaccurate, as there is a lack of research into the number of victims that are trafficked by their family members (Sprang & Cole, 2018). According to Klatt et al (2014), one of the strongest indicators that a child is in danger of being trafficked is if one of their family members is involved in the sex trade (Klatt et al., 2014). In the case of familial sex trafficking, family members may exchange sex with their child for drugs, money, or a place to stay (Sprang & Cole, 2018). In their study of familial sex trafficking, Sprang and Cole (2018) found that mothers were most frequently the traffickers (64.5%). In 32.3% of their cases, the trafficker was the victims' fathers. Other family members (3.2%) accounted for the remainder of traffickers. Because familial sex trafficking involves serious and repeated violations of safety and trust by primary caretakers, the psychological toll this takes on victims can be immense. Complex posttraumatic stress due to repeated exposure to psychosocial trauma in childhood is associated with multiple severe impairments across multiple affective and interpersonal domains. (Sprang & Cole, 2018).

Trafficking, Adult Prostitution and Associated Difficulties

It becomes more difficult for both law enforcement and victims to prove a trafficking charge when the person who is exploited turns 18 and is legally an adult. Siegfriedt (2016) argues that when a child victim of human trafficking turns 18, they move from being a *victim* of a crime to being a *perpetrator* (Siegfriedt, 2016). Laws and social values pertaining to culpability make transitioning into a legal and socially acceptable lifestyle very difficult for adult sex-trafficking victims (Siegfriedt, 2016). A common assumption is that the adult victim of human trafficking willingly chose that lifestyle. Therefore, public compassion for adult victims of sex trafficking is lacking,

regardless of whether the victim was forced into the industry as a child. This lack of public compassion results in criminalization of prostitution.

In the United States, prostitution is illegal in most states. Therefore, rather than being given assistance, sex-trafficking victims are frequently arrested for prostitution. To build a legal defense of sexual trafficking, the defendant must prove fraud, force, or coercion. Convincing prosecutors, judges, or juries that engagement in prostitution was a result of fraud, force, or coercion can be very difficult because it requires the defendant's own testimony. Unfortunately for victims of fraud, force, or coercion, the defendant's testimony, without substantive evidence to back up that testimony, carries very little weight in criminal courts. A large number of sex-trafficking victims have criminal records of prostitution. Public availability of criminal records of sex-related crimes can make obtaining mainstream employment and housing very difficult (Siegfriedt, 2016). Obviously, the inability to obtain mainstream, socially acceptable employment creates a barrier that forces many sex-trafficking victims to retain a lifestyle of abusive relationships, prostitution, and other associated lifestyle variables.

Child Welfare System and Human Trafficking

According to a variety of sources, many sex trafficking victims in the United States were in the child welfare system with some victims being in foster care at some point in time. For example, in a study by Rajaram and Tidbal (2018), the number of participants who were trafficked and were once in the foster care system was 54.6% (Rajaram & Tidball, 2018). In addition, other studies about human trafficking victims and survivors show that as many as 86% of the participants were at some point in time involved with the child welfare system (Olender, 2018). If a child has been sexually

abused in the past and is in the welfare system, they are at great risk of being sex trafficked (Latzman et al., 2019).

Another reason that youth become at risk for being trafficked is running away from foster care placements. A government report to congress used the terms “push” and “pull” factors to describe why youth might run away from foster care (Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children, n.d.). In the report, “pull factors” described things that might cause youth to “run to something” while “push factors” included variables that would cause youth to “run from something” (Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children, n.d.). Common push factors include loneliness, neglect, physical abuse, or sexual abuse while placed with foster parents or while residing in a children’s home. Pull factors include a desire to be close to friends, family, romantic partners, drugs, sex, etc. (Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children, n.d.). While a youth is a “runaway” there is an increased risk of being a trafficked or being exploited. Some youth may exchange sex for food or shelter (Latzman et al., 2019).

Estimating the number of runaway youths who are running from the foster care system is difficult because different agencies define the term “runaway” differently. Some agencies count a youth as missing if they leave where they have been placed without consent while other agencies count a youth as a runaway if they leave their placement without consent for more than 24 hours (Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children, n.d.). For example, in one study 46% of surveyed youth said that they had run from at least one foster care setting (Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children, n.d.). In contrast, the 2015 Adoption and Foster Care

Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) report stated that only 1.2% of foster care youth had run away (Child Welfare System Response to Sex Trafficking of Children, n.d.). One explanation for variation in estimates has to do with the timeframe in which the runaway event occurred. AFCARS, for example, reports the number of youths who runaway at least once within the current year. Therefore, AFCARS reports annual, not lifetime, prevalence. Even so, the inconsistency in operational definitions of what constitutes a *runaway* makes it difficult to precisely assess the number of youths who are in danger of being exploited.

Many youths who are in the child welfare system tend to have limited parent supervision and limited school attendance (Pate et al., 2021). In addition, they have an unstable living situation and may have experienced abuse and neglect (Pate et al., 2021). They may also experience substance abuse problems (Pate et al., 2021). Furthermore, youth who are in the child welfare system are at risk of being trafficked before they enter, during, and after they leave the system (Pate et al., 2021).

Although the number of runaway youths is difficult to assess, there are still some important things that researchers have highlighted. However, over the years, both the juvenile system and the child welfare system have developed assessments and screening to better detect children who are at risk of being trafficked or are being trafficked (Pate et al., 2021). To limit human trafficking, more data is needed to understand how the perception of human trafficking affects how different agencies respond to human trafficking victims.

Human Trafficking in Schools

As stated earlier, the average age of entry into the trafficking industry is between the ages of 12 and 14. Although many trafficking victims attend schools, they are not regularly recognized as trafficking victims by school officials. Likely, the failure to recognize human trafficking victims in schools is due to a lack of understanding and awareness of the problem. Albert (2021), for example, reported that teachers are not trained to detect human trafficking victims. Doiron et al. (2021) noted that the school nurse can play an important role that in detecting victims of human trafficking. However, school nurses also lack adequate awareness of the risk factors, signs, and symptoms of victimization. Such signs often include being hypersexual, being absent from classes, having a mental illness, and/or experiencing homelessness and violence (Fraley & Aronowitz, 2021). In many cases, school nurses and staff were unaware of what was happening with their students. One survivor noted that they often visited the nurse's office presenting the same symptoms with the hope that the nurse would enquire further about what was happening (Fraley & Aronowitz, 2021). However, the nurse did not ask about the student's home situation and failed to identify the student as a victim of human trafficking.

Public schools also serve as a supply warehouse for perpetrators. According to Lemke, 11% of pimps "were found to recruit victims in public schools" (2018, p. 3). According to Fedina et al. (2019), peer influences can play a role in the recruitment of youth into sex trafficking. Additionally, roughly 41% of victims had a friend who was involved in selling sex before they did. However, the study did not indicate if these friends were from school (Fedina et al., 2019). More research is needed to further

understand the role that peers play in the recruitment of children into sex trafficking (Fedina et al., 2019).

The Juvenile Justice System and Human Trafficking

The juvenile system plays an essential role in identifying and helping victims of human trafficking. Trafficked youth can end up in the justice system for a variety of reasons, such as running away, not going to school, and other behaviors. One of the most notable studies about victims of human trafficking in the juvenile justice system was done by Anderson et al. (2016). In their study, they found that practitioners that worked in the juvenile court system viewed people who had been trafficked as both prostitute and victim. Juvenile court practitioners saw victims as victims when they were under the age of 16 or did not look like adults. However, older teenagers were not seen as victims. According to Anderson et al. (2016), when a victim of human trafficking is not treated as a victim, it could lead to a lack of care and services that could help the vulnerable youth. Their delinquent behavior was highlighted more. In their study, juvenile victims were placed either placed on probation or in different types of residential facilities. The goal of using the residential placements appears to be focused on keeping the victims of human trafficking away from “bad people” rather than to address some of the trauma that human trafficking victims faced. One the reasons for this appears to be lack of funding of services that were trauma informed. According to a juvenile coalition in New York, two-thirds of victims of human trafficking experience mental health disorders such as PTSD.

Changes in Perception of Human Trafficking in The Law

Laws that attempted to reduce the exploitation of women and children can be traced back to 1910. In 1910, a federal law criminalized the movement of women across

state lines for “prostitution, debauchery or any other immoral purposes” (Farrell & Cronin, 2015, p. 2). This law gave birth to a new era of regulations that passed across different states in the country that criminalized the selling of sex. One of the reasons that states passed laws to limit prostitution was “to maintain public order, prevent the spread of sexually transmitted disease, and protect women from exploitation” (Farrell & Cronin, 2015, p. 2).

However, by the 1960s and 70s, values shifted from believing women needed protection from exploitation to reducing the visibility of prostitution (Farrell & Cronin, 2015). However, the continual arrests of people who engaged in selling sex did not stop the problem; it was just limited to a certain community or an area in a city. In the 1990s, people’s perceptions shifted, and advocacy groups asked lawmakers to pass laws that protected and helped, especially for children who were forced into selling sex. This resulted in the “Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act being passed in 2000 (Farrell & Cronin, 2015, p. 3). Farrell and Cronin (2015) argue that one of the goals of advocacy groups was to change how people who engage in prostitution are perceived from being criminals to being victims (Farrell & Cronin, 2015). However, despite the passing of the TVPA, laws against prostitution still exist. This means that it falls into the hands of law enforcement and district attorneys to determine if a person who engages in selling sex is engaging in the act out of their volition or if they are engaging in it because someone has used force, fraud, or coercion against them.

Difficulties Prosecuting Human Trafficking Cases

When it comes to the prosecution of human trafficking laws there are difficulties. According to Farrell, Owens, and McDevitt (2014), only 17% of trafficking suspects

were charged in states cases, and 19% were charged in federal cases (Farrell et al., 2014). Even though some states had more comprehensive human trafficking laws, prosecutors did not use those laws. One of the main reasons that prosecutors gave in the study was that the human trafficking laws were new and untested (Farrell et al., 2014). Unsure of whether they would win these cases, prosecutors tended to prefer tested laws that existed before the enactment of human trafficking laws. However, when they had more witnesses and compelling evidence, prosecutors were more likely to file human trafficking charges than when they did not (Farrell et al., 2014).

Another reason prosecutors are reluctant to file charges is due to a Supreme Court ruling, in the case of *Crawford vs. Washington*, that victims can be cross-examined in cases of domestic violence. Many victims of human trafficking are reluctant to testify, and when they do not testify, prosecutors are reluctant to press charges (Farrell et al., 2014). Another difficulty that prosecutors have in prosecuting human trafficking cases is the perception that judges and jury have concerning human trafficking victims (Farrell et al., 2014). Some juries or judges still hold the view that, unless trafficking victims are held in chains, they are willing participants (Farrell et al., 2014). Further complicating matters is the fact that many human trafficking victims have criminal records, and prosecutors find it difficult to prosecute traffickers when the victims have committed a crime. Many victims of human trafficking may have abused drugs while being trafficked (Farrell et al., 2014).

As stated earlier, one of the difficulties in predicting or even estimating the number of trafficking victims in the United States is the lack of police and prosecutors labeling an incident as human trafficking. Over the years, there has been an improvement

in how police are treating victims of human trafficking. However, the perception that police hold towards human trafficking victims still needs to be addressed.

In a study by Farrell and Pfeffer (2014) that examined how law enforcement policed human trafficking, a police supervisor said that they focused on helping children who had been exploited rather than on adults (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). One of the reasons police exert more effort into policing traffickers of minors is because fraud, force and coercion do not need to be proven when the victim is a minor (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). In addition, minors are more likely viewed as vulnerable; therefore, minors garner most of the public support (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). Therefore, a lot of resources are invested in investigators that specialize in detecting and helping commercially exploited youth.

One of the reasons police do not devote sufficient resources to investigating human trafficking is because most citizens do not believe human trafficking is a priority (Farrell and & Pfeffer, 2014). If organizations can increase the awareness of human trafficking to the public, it might impact police response and resources on this issue.

One of the things that Farrell and Pfeffer (2014) noted in their study is that victims, even when they are arrested for prostitution, would not say that they are being trafficked. This can be because of the trauma bond attachment that might develop between a trafficker and a trafficked victim.

Farrell and Pfeffer (2014) also revealed that one of the ways that law enforcement discovered instances of human trafficking was through tips (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). When it comes to the detection of human trafficking victims, the study noted that although some police officers, such as detectives, received training for human trafficking,

other police officers, like patrol officers, did not. The study also notes that police departments involved in the study did not have both an “investigative culture and institutional structure” to adequately detect signs of human trafficking (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). According to Wilson and Dalton (2008), some trafficking victims have at some point contacted with law enforcement while being trafficked; however, law enforcement agencies failed to detect the victims being trafficked in 11 out of 12 of the cases (Wilson & Dalton, 2008). In some cases in their study, victims of sex trafficking were charged with prostitution and were to the juvenile justice system (Wilson & Dalton, 2008). In those cases, police did not recognize the victims as sex trafficking victims. What determines how law enforcement responds to instances of human trafficking has to do with their relationship with federal agencies that tend to be more equipped with fighting human trafficking. In the study conducted by (Wilson & Dalton, 2008), the police department did not make a lot of effort to find runaway youth. As stated earlier, when youth run away, they can quickly be approached by a trafficker. In a study done by Northeastern University, 3,000 police agencies were interviewed regarding law enforcements’ perception of human trafficking, how often law enforcement investigates human trafficking cases, what happens during those cases, and what the prosecution of those cases was. One of the notable findings of this study is that the larger a community is, the more likely they are to perceive human trafficking as a problem. In addition, how prepared a law enforcement agency is to prosecute or to bring charges about human trafficking will affect if they prosecute any cases of human trafficking. In their study, they state that only 18% of agencies in the local, country, or in-state had the training necessary to with human trafficking. One thing noted in this study is that 92% of

trafficking cases were was linked to other crimes being committed, like drugs (Farrell et al., 2008). The study showed that when the federal government set up interagency groups and training on human trafficking, more arrest and investigate were made. Furthermore, their perception of seeing human trafficking as a problem in their community increased (Farrell et al., 2008). To improve law enforcement response to human trafficking, the study highlighted some areas of improvements, including: trying to understand the current level of human trafficking in the community, seeking to improve protocols, police talking with victims of human trafficking, understanding the complexity of human trafficking, having a victim-centered approach to dealing with issues of the crime, and working with other law enforcement (Farrell et al., 2008).

Hospital and Healthcare Professionals

Although law enforcement is essential in the process of helping victims of human trafficking, other institutions such as healthcare and schools, play an essential role in detecting signs of human trafficking. When detecting and finding signs that a person is being trafficked, healthcare workers play a crucial role. Many healthcare workers interact with people who are being trafficked because often they may come into the hospital for treatment for things like sexually transmitted infection (STIs) or for physical violence. According to a study by Lederer and Wetzel (2014) human trafficking victims in the study encountered healthcare professionals (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014). In their study, they found that 87.8% of victims encountered a healthcare provider, 64.3% of participants had been to an emergency room, 57.1% had visited a clinic, and 21.4% had been to an urgent care facility. In a qualitative study by Long and Dowdell (2018), nurses' perception of human trafficking was similar to what was seen in the media rather than what is in the

literature. In addition, nurses were not offered training and did not have protocols to detect victims of human trafficking. The main perception of human trafficking was that human trafficking victims were “young, female, and foreign-born” (Long & Dowdell, 2018, p.4). In a study by Baldwin and colleagues (2011) trafficking victims described their interaction with healthcare workers (Baldwin et al., 2011). In the study, both victims of labor trafficking and sex trafficking were taken to a healthcare setting. In the study responses, the survivors said that they were accompanied by their trafficker, who, at times, spoke for them. The survivors in the study also talked about lying to healthcare professional about what was going on with them. Survivors in the study said that they felt a sense of both “hopelessness and helplessness” about what they experienced (Baldwin et al., 2011, p.9). The study had 12 participants, but none of the participants were identified by healthcare workers as victims of human trafficking. Survivors were helped by police through other people and entities that discovered their situation. In a qualitative study by Beck, Lineer, Melzer-Lange, Simpson, Nugent, and Rabbitt (2015) looking at people who worked in a healthcare setting, more than half of nurses, social workers, etc., failed to detect a sex trafficking victim (Beck et al., 2015). However, in the study, healthcare workers who were trained to detect signs of sex trafficking were able to detect it better than those who were not trained. Some states, like Texas, require nurses and healthcare professionals to be trained in detecting human trafficking. In a study about detecting human trafficking in emergency rooms in Texas, only 40.7% screened people for human trafficking, and 37% screened children for human trafficking undetected (Dols et al., 2019). The lack of screening for human trafficking could mean that a lot of children and adults go undetected (Dols et al., 2019).

Using Screening Tools to Detect Human Trafficking

One of the ways to detect human trafficking victims is using screening tools. There are a variety of screening tools that are used by different agencies. One of the challenges and the main reason for using screening tools is that many victims of human trafficking do not identify that they trafficked (Macy et al., 2021) . The benefit of screening tools is that they can help with limit the bias of a person who works in either in a hospital or a human services (Peterson et al., 2022). However not every agency that is most likely to interact with human trafficking victims has screening tools to detect victims. According to Peterson et al., (2022), in a study that looked at the use of screening tools among emergency departments, found that 37% of participating emergency department screened for child sex trafficking. The lack of screening tools means that a lot of child sex trafficking victims go undetected.

Currently in the U.S., there are a lot of screening tools that are available for agencies to use such as the Adult Human Trafficking Screening Tool, Commercial Sexual Exploitation Identification Tool, Human Trafficking Assessment for Domestic Workers, etc., (Macy et al., 2021). Screening tools might differ in the way that thy are implemented, for example, screening tools might be limited to a certain age group or a certain agency (Macy et al., 2021).

CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to learn from different types of professionals and their perceptions of human trafficking, the types of assessment tools used to identify victims and inform practice with human trafficking victims, the different procedures organizations use to detect victims of human trafficking, and the types of services offered to human trafficking victims. This is a qualitative study that collected different perspectives from different organizations that are more likely to encounter victims of human trafficking. I interviewed nine people from various agencies in Abilene. Participants in the study are referred to as respondents. Seven of the respondents had experience working or interacting with human trafficking victims. In total, there are five agencies in Abilene that are represented in the study; one law enforcement, three people involved in the child welfare system, one person who had experience working directly with victims of human trafficking, a hospital staff, two people who worked with Abilene school district, and a district attorney. The selected individuals were recommended by a person who had experience working with human trafficking victims in Abilene, Texas. A majority of the people that were interviewed worked directly with children and not adults. Out of the eight people who were interviewed for the study, six respondents primarily worked with minors and two had experience interacting with victims who were both minors and adults. The following questions in this study focused on how the perceptions

of people who interact with potential human trafficking victims influences the protocols and procedures that are meant to help victims of human trafficking. Questions that focus on perceptions of human trafficking aimed to understand how the participants of the study viewed victims of human trafficking. The questions that focused on protocol and perception looked at the protocols that were activated once an agency detected a victim or potential victim of human trafficking.

Perception Questions

1. How has your agency worked with child trafficking victims?
2. What does sex trafficking look like to you?
3. How would you describe a juvenile who sells sex?
 - When working (or if you have worked) with victims of sex trafficking, what behaviors were displayed by the victims of human trafficking?
 - Were the victims of human trafficking accused of any crimes?
4. How would you describe an adult who sells sex?
5. Have you had any interaction with victims of human trafficking?
6. Do you think sex trafficking is a problem in Abilene?

Protocols and Procedures Questions

7. What protocols does your agency have to help victims of human trafficking?
8. Does your agency use screening tools to detect human trafficking?
 - What detection tool does your agency use to identify victims of human trafficking?
9. Does your agency have procedures in place when victims of human trafficking are detected?

- Are police notified?
 - Are other agencies in Taylor County notified?
10. What training does your agency have when it comes to helping victims of human trafficking?
11. What challenges does your agency face when helping victims of human trafficking?

Selection and Consent of Participants

After getting approval from the Abilene Christian University Institutional Review Board Committee for exempt research (see Appendix), participants were selected and contacted using a key-informant strategy. Key informants were identified by contacting organizations that were likely to routinely encounter human trafficking victims. Phone calls and email requests were used to contact the participants. Online resources (e.g., search engines, organization websites, etc.) were also used to search for email addresses or phone numbers of key informants. Additional key-informant contact information (i.e., phone number or email address) was identified through personal contact with third parties known by the researcher.

After a key informant agreed to participate in this study, an informed consent document was delivered to the participant (in person or by email). Participants were asked to sign the consent form and return it to the researcher. All participants confirmed that they agreed to be interviewed by signing the informed consent form.

Interview Procedure

Once a participant agreed to be interviewed, a time and location were determined. Interviews were conducted either in the participant's office, in a conference room, or by Zoom. Each of the interviews was recorded. All participants were informed about the

study's purpose, methods, benefits or lack of benefits, and other potential risks by allowing them sufficient time to read, or by the researcher reading, the informed consent document.

Data Collection, Storage, and Analysis

Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, and a transcript was made using the service Otter and the interviewer's own transcription. Only the principal investigator had possession of the recording. Transcribed data were coded so that no identifying information would be on the transcription. Table 1 below shows the number of respondents interviewed, their occupation, and the number allocated to each respondent for the purpose of study.

Table 1

Interview of Participants by Work Role

Interviewee	Role	Number
Respondent 1, 2, 3	Child Welfare Service	3
Respondent 4	Law Enforcement	1
Respondent 5	Hospital Staff	1
Respondent 6	Victims Services	1
Respondent 7	School Employees	2
Respondent 9	D.A. Office	1

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Perception of Human Trafficking Victims

The following sections present the results of the analysis of respondents' answers to interview questions. Broadly, questions were designed to elicit information about how respondents perceive the problem of human trafficking in Abilene and the protocols and procedures agencies follow when victims are identified. These following six questions were asked to elicit information regarding perception of human trafficking:

1. How has your agency worked with child trafficking victims?
2. What does sex trafficking look like to you?
3. How would you describe a juvenile who sells sex?
 - When working (or if you have worked with) victims of sex trafficking, what behaviors were displayed by the victims of human trafficking?
 - Were the victims of human trafficking accused of any crimes?
4. How would you describe an adult who sells sex?
5. Have you had any interaction with victims of human trafficking?
6. Do you think sex trafficking is a problem in Abilene?

Based on the information collected throughout the interviews, certain themes emerged regarding how participants viewed human trafficking victims in Abilene. The “Results” section of this thesis looks at how respondents perceive human trafficking victims by looking at how victims are vulnerable to recruitment, their experience as

victims, as well as the procedures that are in place to detect human trafficking victims and the services that are available in Abilene to help victims view victims of human trafficking.

Working with Victims

Respondents worked with victims in various ways. Interestingly, respondents from the public school system stated they are not aware of working with victims of human trafficking because they have no tools for identifying these victims. The law enforcement respondent stated that they try to be compassionate toward victims and will frequently refer them to services to meet basic needs. In the hospital, services are primarily medical. However, the nurse interviewed discussed several cases in which attempts were made to verbally intervene by suggesting to the suspected victim that help is available. This nurse also described attempts to separate the suspected victim from a suspected perpetrator to eliminate threat of coercion; however, the nurse stated this was often difficult. Though the primary responsibility of foster care workers involves work with parents, respondents from foster care agencies do get involved in working with the victims when the parent is unavailable. Unavailability of parents can be due to parental drug use. Respondent one illustrated this with the following quotation:

Law enforcement goes to the hotel and they end up finding a pimp and young girls are being trafficked, okay, so DFPS, child protective investigations, they will go, law enforcement will go. If from that situation, they determine that their needs to be a removal of those kids, so maybe mom is like “she has been running of the streets for a long time. I can’t control her. She does whatever the heck that she wants to. She is using drugs whatever. I can’t do it. My hands are up.” DFPS will

take possession of that child and ultimately, she will come to us. And then we will be looking for, what do we do next, so we have a kiddo out there who has just been trafficked. And we have got to get her safe. And so our role will be setting up the service for them connecting them with community resources, but it will also be housing.

Awareness of Human Trafficking in Abilene

Respondents varied in the degree to which they believed human trafficking to be a problem in Abilene. Six out of nine respondents said that they believed human trafficking was a problem. However, two respondents vehemently expressed their belief that child sexual abuse is a far greater problem than human trafficking is in Abilene. Based on their work, they had not seen a lot of human trafficking cases in Abilene. To illustrate this, one of these respondents stated:

I think it occurs; we do see those handful of victims. And that doesn't mean that there's not more out there that we're not seeing. But I do, I do think that the child sexual abuse out far outweighs in terms of something being a problem here versus not. I definitely think that it happens here and surrounding communities, but I definitely [believe] our numbers are much higher for child sexual abuse cases.

On the other hand, several participants expressed the opinion that the number of sex-trafficking cases occurring in Abilene is far greater than most citizens are aware. Some respondents expressed the view that Abilene citizens are blindly unaware that sex-trafficking is occurring because they do not believe sex-trafficking can occur in a conservative Christian town. For example, Respondent 1 stated:

And so to think that it doesn't happen in Abilene, because we are a Christian town. And all that stuff would be just us putting blinders to what is going on. . . .

I-20 comes straight to our town . . . it has a huge impact on kids being trafficked.

Stated differently, sexual trafficking goes unnoticed simply because residents are not aware of the problem; therefore, most residents are simply not looking for the problem.

In addition, respondents stated that much of the sexual trafficking in Abilene is transitory. In fact, several participants believed that much sexual trafficking occurs but goes undetected because Interstate 20 passes through Abilene. This places Abilene on several sex-trafficking routes that some referred to as the "Texas Triangle," which includes Houston, El Paso, San Antonio, and all points in between. Therefore, much of the sexual trafficking occurring in Abilene comes from outside of Abilene.

For these reasons, attempting to estimate a valid number of victims in Abilene is very difficult. Based on the stories that respondents told, the number of cases they had worked with varied. However, the numbers that respondents stated only reflect cases that were identified as sexual trafficking cases. Many of the respondents said that the lack of detection protocols is the reason that many human trafficking victims go undetected.

According to Respondent 6, getting law enforcement personnel to recognize victims of human trafficking as victims can be challenging. This respondent recalled an incident where some youths were coerced into committing a crime. The respondent stated that the police officers failed to recognize the situation as a human trafficking situation.

According to this respondent, recent legislation could change the manner in which police officers respond to potential human trafficking situations.

Perception of Victims as Vulnerable to Exploitation

One frequent way that respondents described human trafficking victims was that they were trying to meet a basic need. Three respondents (1, 5, and 6) believed that people being trafficked were trying to meet a need—either basic needs like food or clothing, or emotional needs. Meeting basic needs was frequently described as a primary reason a victim might fall prey to a trafficker. Traffickers exploit the victim by understanding their needs and capitalizing on that vulnerability to form a bond. At first, the trafficker befriends the victim appearing to meet these emotional and social needs. For example, Respondent 1 stated: “They are looking for connection and what that connection looks like for them. Somebody who’s meeting their needs and at that time they feel that the trafficker is the one that is meeting those needs for them.” Respondent 6 described emotional needs as follows:

How do I view them? I view them as a child was crying out for help. All behavior necessitates in need. So, there’s something that that child is lacking, that they’re trying to fill that void with sex or wonder. I mean, you know, it’s like, my one that multiple times she has, all she’s wanted is like a Happy Meal or, or a little amount of money. So, she’s not getting that need met at home. And so she’s looking for other ways to get it met.

One population that is particularly vulnerable to sexual trafficking are homeless youth. According to Respondents 7 and 8, Abilene lacks sufficient housing for homeless youth, which increases their vulnerability to human traffickers. Many reasons exist that account for youth in Abilene becoming homeless. Frequently, homeless youth are running away from unsatisfactory home environments. In many cases, they are fleeing

child abuse, domestic violence, they become pregnant, or because they get involved with drugs or. As Respondent 7 stated:

[parents] lose . . . [their] job, get divorced, get sick, you know, any of those things. And then or just domestic violence, drugs, alcohol, pregnancy. Students that are, you know, especially like unaccompanied youth the ones that are by themselves, you know, getting pregnant homosexuality just having an attitude you know, they get kicked out for really just anything.

Exploitation by Online Relationships, “Friends,” and Family

Two respondents stated that youth can be particularly vulnerable to online sexual exploitation. Respondents 4 and 9 stated that online recruitment is the norm occurring more often than other forms of recruitment. Online recruitment typically begins as a friendly online connection, but eventually leads to exploitation. For example, Respondent 4 stated:

[online] solicitation usually begins seemingly friendly, nothing adversary illegal about it. But the individual will slowly once they start building trust and communication, they’ll groom the victim to the point where their buying them gifts; they run away from home to be with them. And ultimately, they’ll start exploiting them sexually.

Other forms of recruitment respondents talked about included exploitation by friends and family members. Respondent 5, recalling a story about a victim of trafficking, recalled that a young girl (person B) and her younger sister (person C) were lured into a house by a friend of hers (person A) who had left the school that she attended. Once she and her sister were lured into the house, they were repeatedly raped by three adult males.

Respondent 6 asserted that victims of human trafficking were sometimes exploited by a family member. Participant 6 stated, “I have kids that are familial trafficked, so someone in their family is the trafficker and they don’t even leave their house.”

Compassionate Perception of Victims

Although the interviews did not focus on what life was like while being trafficked, many respondents expressed compassion toward victims describing them as victims instead of criminals (i.e., prostitutes). Respondents who worked directly with victims (2, 3, and 6) preferred the use of alternative labels (i.e., children) to the term *victim* that was used by the other respondents. For example, Respondent 3 stated: “I don’t think victim versus perpetrator, I think child. We have children who come in, and they come in for a lot of different reasons.” Respondent 6 used similar phrasing. In addition, although Respondent 1 said that she saw victims as victims, she also said that she leaves the terms victim or survivor or (a different term) to people who had experienced human trafficking. Respondent 1 stated, “they don’t see themselves as victims. . . . They don’t see themselves as that. And sometimes they prefer the term *survivor*. And sometimes you are like, ‘I can’t use either of those terms because you don’t like them.’”

Though several participants stated that sexual trafficking victims frequently are users of illicit drugs, they expressed the belief that the use of drugs was a way that victims cope with trauma. For example, Respondent 5, when describing trafficking victims, noted that they are frequently victims of sexual abuse or are addicted to illicit drugs. Respondent 5 stated that, while being trafficked, victims often experienced physical and sexual abuse. This respondent recalled a teenage boy who was dropped off at the hospital with a ruptured appendix and in need of urgent medical care. In another

story that Respondent 5 told, she recalled a victim of sexual trafficking that that had been raped. Respondent 5 stated that victims who visit the hospital are usually “high, drunk,” as well as “impaired.” Respondent 1 stated that one of the victims of human trafficking that she saw was a person who “come to us as IV drug using, and so we have needed to detox her before.” For example, Respondent 1 said that, for this specific victim, once after she had received treatment at the hospital, she left the care of the hospital.

Respondent 5 was the only respondent to use both *victim* and *perpetrator*. To further explain this, Respondent 5 recounted a story, as was previously mentioned, where a girl (person A) who tricked a person (person B) she knew into a house where men took her (person B) and her younger sister (person C) and raped them. Respondent 5 said that the girl (person A) who lured the other girl (person B) and her sister (person C) was both a victim and perpetrator because the girl (person A) could have also been trafficked. However, throughout the interview, Respondent 5 made references to people who were trafficked as victims based on her experience and interaction with people who had been trafficked.

Negative Perception of Victims

Many times, trafficking victims break laws and are involved with the juvenile justice system. At least two respondents expressed the viewpoint that sexual trafficking victims are frequently treated callously by law enforcement. These two respondents spoke of a female sexual trafficking victim who was placed in a juvenile facility with sex offenders. Recalling the incident, Respondent 6 stated:

And the first time she went, they actually put her in a facility with sex offenders.

So part of it is, is working closely with them to get them to realize that hey, this

child, maybe this child does have charges and you're viewing them as a criminal, but then they also have this other component. And so once we can get them to recognize that then we can get them to sometimes help with counseling, or even allowing us as victim advocates to go in there and work with them.

Respondent 6 discussed the difficulties encountered by law enforcement with trying to help victims when they are distrustful of law enforcement. Often, this distrust is related to victims being taught to distrust law enforcement or the way in which victims are treated by law enforcement. Being treated as an offender increases the distrust that victims have in law enforcement. Respondent 6 stated,

I mean, they're taught, don't say anything, don't trust them, and plus when they have charges, that's another thing. When they have charges, and they are being locked up because they're viewed as a perpetrator . . . and tell just like what, you know, until law enforcement sees the other part of that sphere because of the way they're treated like they're the perpetrator or offender, they automatically have a hyper sense of distrust for law enforcement, because they [law enforcement] don't view them as the victim.

Victims are often negatively perceived because they have developed skills for surviving in the harsh environment endemic to sexual trafficking. Respondents referred to one such survival skill as "streets smarts." As stated above, victims learn to be distrustful because of the manner in which they are treated by law enforcement personnel and others. Often, victims of trafficking appear to be evasive, manipulative, or dishonest when they interact with law enforcement personnel or with other service providers. Respondent 4 stated the following regarding interactions with human trafficking victims:

typically, it's not the first time that they've been in a situation like this. And so you're dealing with a lot of street intelligence is what we call it street smarts. And you have to be real with them, the things they've seen and done. Don't compare a lot of times to a typical life. And so sometimes being gentle with them. They'll just take advantage of that not answer your questions, but you get on their level. And a lot of times they'll open up with you and start explaining more of what happened. They are very closed off very reserved as to what they want.

Other respondents described the reticence of human trafficking victims to readily engage with them as "hardness," "lack of trust," or "a saddened acceptance of their life circumstances." This acceptance of their life circumstances appears to produce an attitude of oppositional defiance. For example, Respondent 9 noted that some victims "see themselves as self-reliant." However, this respondent also quoted victims as uttering phrases such as "I don't need police. I don't need social workers. I'll do it myself. I'll live my own life." In addition, some sexual trafficking victims accept their plight as being better than what they ran away from. Respondent 5 recalled a story of a trafficked person who stated: "at least I'm getting paid" as a preferable option to "being sexually assaulted by family members every night."

Although victims of human trafficking can be arrested in crimes unrelated to being human trafficking such as thefts, Respondent 4 stated that at times victims of human trafficking are arrested to help them.

Typically, unfortunately, in the State of Texas, and mostly across the United States, the only way to open up services for a lot of these kids is through being charged with a crime. So there are occasions where we will charge them with

another crime that's unrelated in order to protect them. For instance, I had a case where the young lady would pick up adults and have sex with them. Quite often, I think three times we ended up working cases and falling cases on adult suspects. Well, the only way to prevent that since her mother couldn't control her. At 14 years old, the only way to stop that behavior was to arrest her for an unrelated crime.

It should be noted that Respondent 9 who works at the DA office stated that when minors are brought into the juvenile system there is greater stress on rehabilitation.

The adult system and juvenile system have different goals. Yeah, but we do handle juveniles here. And we have a juvenile prosecutor. And again, if we have a juvenile crime, and it's been sent over and investigated, if at some point, we believe that child is a victim of trafficking, I do think we then treat that child differently that child is a victim of and we're not going to prosecute them . . . the role juvenile, though, is to rehabilitate the child.

Protocols and Procedures

Several themes emerged from the questions pertaining to protocols and procedures. Six broad themes respondents discussed included methods for identifying sexual trafficking victims, assessment, collaborative efforts to deal with sexual trafficking victims, services provided to trafficking victims, training respondents had received about sexual trafficking, and challenges faced in working with or on behalf of this population. These themes roughly corresponded to the interview questions. Those questions pertaining to protocols and procedures are as follows.

7. What protocols does your agency have to help victims of human trafficking?

8. Does your agency use screening tools to detect human trafficking?
9. What detection tool does your agency use to identify victims of human trafficking?
10. Does your agency have procedures in place when victims of human trafficking are detected?
 - Are police notified?
 - Are other agencies in Taylor County notified?
11. What training does your agency have when it comes to helping victims of human trafficking?
12. What challenges does your agency face when helping victims of human trafficking?

Detection of Human Trafficking Victims

With respect to identification of victims of sexual trafficking, participants discussed the use of screening tools to facilitate identification, the importance of establishing relationships with potential victims, and psychosocial assessment. With some respondents, identification of human trafficking victims appeared to be a higher priority than with other respondents. Hypothetically, respondents training on human trafficking and their access to screening tools, influenced the importance that they place on human trafficking and identifying human trafficking victims.

Some support for this hypothesis is provided by the fact that one respondent was unaware of any human trafficking screening tools available to her, and this respondent could not definitely recall whether or not she had ever worked with a victim of sexual trafficking. This respondent, for example, stated:

We don't have a specific screening tool that I know of. They do make us we have you know, had to watch videos or trainings or whatever regarding human trafficking and signs and stuff like that, but I don't believe we have an actual screening tool. . . . I can't say that I know for sure that I've ever had a child, but, you know, a human trafficking victim. I've had a couple that I've thought their situation was really weird, and didn't make a lot of sense.

At the other end of this salience spectrum, those providing victim services or advocacy had been trained to use screening tools and were actively on the look-out for human trafficking victims. Actively looking—and knowing what to look for—increases the number of victims that are identified. On the other hand, when identification of human trafficking victims is not salient to a respondent, the respondent had not received specific training to use screening tools, which, likely resulted in failure to identify victims. Respondent 6 put it in these words:

So it's the commercial, commercial sexual exploitation identification tool that we use for screening. And so when we got this [agency] trained, in one month the amount of children that we flagged as clear concern, and that was referred to our agency, was what we [previously] tracked in a year. So, it's not that it's not happening in Abilene. It's that it's not being identified for what it is.

If salience is an important prerequisite to identification of human trafficking victims, then high salience should correspond to identification of higher numbers of human trafficking victims than would low salience. A more moderate level of salience should result in fewer identified victims of human trafficking. A moderate degree of salience seems to be operating with two respondents who preferred use of the term *child*

to either *perpetrator* or *victim*. According to these respondents, far fewer victims of human trafficking exist than do victims of sexual assault. These respondents also expressed some frustration with the recent attention given to human trafficking. For example, respondent 3 said:

I mean, we have more children who are being victimized sexually by people that they know and love than we have children being trafficked. . . . I mean, it's a huge difference. And I think that it's probably one of my frustrations is that because government, different levels have become focused and aware and putting funding towards this problem. It has somehow kind of become the thing that everybody's focused on.

Screening Tools

Respondents 2, 3, 5, 6, and 8 all referred to a specific screening tool that they use for identification of human trafficking victims. This tool was referred to as the C-tool, the CSE-IT, and the Commercial Sexual Exploitation-Identification Tool (CSE-IT). Across various agencies that work with children who might be potential trafficking victims, the CSE-IT tool appears to be the most frequently used tool in Abilene to screen for human trafficking victims. Agencies using this particular tool included welfare services (Respondents 1 through 3), victims services (Respondent 6), hospitals (Respondent 5), and school employees (Respondent 8). Also cited, but less frequently used, was the Adult Human Trafficking Screening Tool. One respondent referred to the use of this tool in the context of riding along with a police officer.

Assessment

Some respondents described a readiness to disclose information phenomenon existing in victims. Victims who were not ready to admit that anything had happened to them were characterized as being in denial. Other victims who offered a little bit of information were called “tentative.” Other victims were described as being in a state of active disclosure. Those in active disclosure were ready to talk and willing to provide details regarding their ordeal. Still other victims were described as being “hardened.” Hardened victims were described as being very self-reliant and refused offers of assistance.

Fear was cited by Respondents 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 as being a barrier to willingness to disclose information pertaining to experiences of sexual trafficking. Respondents 6 and 8 both discussed the need to build rapport and establish a trusting relationship with the victims before they would disclose information regarding their own victimization.

Respondent 6 stated the following:

So my job is building rapport with mainly 22 and under, and just getting them to trust me and be that one person so that if they run away, if they get themselves in a situation where they don't feel like they can reach out to an adult or someone else, that I'm that safe person that they can reach out to and get them help.

Though no standardized biopsychosocial assessment procedure was exposed by any respondent, several respondents discussed assessment strategies used with potential victims. One referred to the importance of being aware of cues to the possibility that they are interacting with a victim or trafficker. Some respondents described various suspicious circumstances and certain behaviors as being cues. For example, a respondent from the

homeless program in the public school system talked about adults who appear to know very little about a child they are attempting to register for school. Respondent 8 stated that one of the biggest red flags was a child who was abnormally shy and reticent to open up to anybody. Other cues identified by respondents included poor hygiene, being impaired, and having another person with them that did most of the talking.

Many times, human trafficking victims are first discovered through law enforcement operations or during a hospital visit. However, identification is often difficult for reasons already described. During visits to the hospital, victims will commonly be accompanied by a person (i.e., suspected trafficker) who stands guard over the potential victim and does the majority of the talking. Hospital staff are advised to try to separate the suspected trafficker and the suspected victim. However, Respondent 5 said that this was not always possible. Respondent 5 discussed some tactics used to try to separate the suspected trafficker from the suspected victim. This respondent stated:

we try to separate them from the person that's with them . . . you can do that a lot of times by saying "I'm gonna take you to get an X-ray" . . . or "here, I need you to go to another room to, to pee in a cup" . . . Even use of such tactics fails with some suspected traffickers as they refuse to allow the suspected victim any privacy.

According to Respondent 5, the police will get involved in cases involving minors, but with adults, there is nothing that they can do. Respondent 5 stated that she normally tries to influence the suspected victim to seek help regardless of the presence of the suspected trafficker. Respondent 5 stated,

I'm not sure what's really going on here. But I think that you need some physical help with your asthma or whatever problem that they're having. But I also think that you might need some other help, and you're just not ready for it right now. And even with the person sitting right there, I'll tell them if at any time that you feel unsafe, or anytime that you want help, wherever you're at, if you go to a hospital, they have to help wherever you're at.

Collaborative Efforts to Serve Victims of Human Trafficking

Once a victim of human trafficking is suspected, personnel from various law enforcement, child protection, and child advocacy agencies meet together to coordinate the child trafficking investigation. A multidisciplinary team (MDT) is composed of members from various disciplines to provide child sex-trafficking victims with the same services sexual abuse victims receive. These services include forensic interviews, family advocacy, medical exams, and mental health care. To ensure the needs of the child are being met, the MDT conducts case reviews.

In December of 2021, in partnership with the governor's office, local agencies created a care coordination team. The care coordination team brings together various agencies that work with victims to plan and coordinate services provided specifically to help people who are trafficked. All child victims of human trafficking are assigned an advocate who will remain assigned to the victim until the victim reaches adulthood. One respondent described the care coordination team as follows:

We have a care coordination team; we've got all the agencies ready. And as soon as we detect, you know, these, these cases, whether or not there's any crime, if we detect, if we find out that we think a girl or boy is a victim of trafficking or an

adult, it doesn't matter if no crime is found, that person will be taken care of from that day on in the system, especially children. So if we find a girl and the screening tool indicates, hey, I think there's they're at risk to be trafficked, they will get an advocate and that advocate stays with them till they're an adult period. Whether or not we ever uncover a crime, find the person who's doing it anything. So, we, we will deal with the crime, but our system will help that victim until they are an adult.

Challenges

Many of the challenges identified by respondents have been discussed already under different topics. Such challenges include difficulty identifying victims, difficulty gaining the victim's trust, the transitoriness of sexual trafficking, and language barriers. Additional challenges identified by participants included difficulty finding local services and placements for victims, and law enforcement-related challenges.

Human trafficking victims require specialized housing. Many respondents (1, 2, 3, and 6) identified the lack of local housing, specifically for child sex-trafficking victims, as a challenge. Often, child sex-trafficking victims do not want to travel long distances from home to reside in treatment facilities designed specifically for sex-trafficking victims. Those sent to such placements against their wishes are likely to run away possibly returning to the sexual trafficking industry. Both Respondents 1 and 4 recounted stories of human trafficking victims running away from their placement. Often when victims of trafficking run away, they might return back to trafficking.

With regard to law enforcement-related challenges, respondents mentioned the length of time it takes for a sex-trafficking case to go to trial, challenges related to using a

sexual trafficking victim as a witness, lack of understanding of victimization by law enforcement personnel, and the lack of experience in investigating sexual trafficking cases. Respondent 1 stated that there can be a one or two-year delay between the time a trafficker is arrested and the time the case goes to court. Asking a victim to testify after that much time has elapsed creates a risk of traumatization.

Although there are systems of care to help child victims, when it comes to prosecuting traffickers in the past it was difficult due to lack of clear trafficking laws for prosecutors to use. However, Respondent 9 remained optimistic, noting that the recent update to the Texas penal code would help prosecute traffickers. The penal code outlines what the Texas considers coercion, fraud, and force in a trafficking case making it easier to charge traffickers.

To conclude, respondents' perception of human trafficking victims appears to be consistent with literature in terms of behaviors. Furthermore, when looking at the policies that are in place to detect human trafficking victims are in the process of being put in place. However, greater detection protocols and emphasis need to be placed on homeless youth.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Brief Summary of Findings

During the course of the interviews, all respondents indicated that they believed that human trafficking was a problem in Abilene. There seemed to be some disagreement about the scope of human sexual trafficking with some respondents saying recent attention to human sexual trafficking is exaggerated and much less of a problem than sexual abuse. Other respondents indicated that the number of sexual trafficking victims that are identified is only a very small proportion of the number of sexual trafficking victims that truly exist. Because Interstate 20 passes through Abilene, many of the sexual trafficking victims are transient. Use of internet services and text messaging, in combination with easy access to Abilene via Interstate 20, results in numerous cases of sexual trafficking that go undetected. Furthermore, the belief that Abilene is a quiet, safe, law-abiding Christian town—a belief held by many residents—likely leads to a perceptual bias against perceiving human sexual trafficking. Therefore, detection of, and accurate estimation of, the numbers of victims is very difficult.

While all the respondents exhibited some compassion for victims of trafficking, they also indicated that many law enforcement personnel are not as compassionate and still treat victims of sexual trafficking as criminals. Therefore, it is very unlikely that all victims who encounter law enforcement personnel are identified as victims. Likely, a similar attitude (bias) persists among citizens and some child services agencies. Until

attitudes of those investigating child trafficking cases, or those working with victims of child human trafficking, change so that victims are recognized as victims, cases of sexual trafficking will continue to be misidentified and treated as something else.

The introduction of training about human trafficking and training to use screening tools like the CSE-IT tool has resulted in more cases of human trafficking being detected. Specific training to identify human trafficking victims increases awareness of human trafficking. Those trained to screen for human trafficking indicated that training increased knowledge of circumstances and behaviors indicative of trafficking. Increased knowledge likely increases attention to warning signs or circumstances indicative of exploitation.

Protocols and Challenges

Frequently, victims first enter the victim services arena by being arrested. While much work is underway to change attitudes and law enforcement policies, many victims still undergo harsh treatment by law enforcement agents. Human trafficking laws are still relatively new and have not been tried in courts. Though efforts are underway to train police officers to recognize cases of human trafficking, the fact remains that old attitudes die hard. To help develop and implement more effective and compassionate treatment for victims of child sexual trafficking, a multidisciplinary team was created.

Once a victim of human trafficking is detected, the case is brought to a multidisciplinary team or to a care coordination team. The multidisciplinary team establishes protocols and procedures to ensure that victims are cared for during criminal investigations of trafficking cases. The multidisciplinary team also makes decisions about screening tools member agencies should use, and training members should receive. A

care coordination seems to fulfill many of the same functions as the multidisciplinary team but focuses more on the care-related services victims of sexual trafficking receive.

Meeting the needs of child victims is complicated by several factors. One such factor is a shortage of local housing for homeless children or youth who are human trafficking victims. A related factor is a lack of services specifically designed to meet the needs of trafficking victims. The reality that many human trafficking victims are transient creates complications for identifying victims and for law enforcement efforts. An additional complicating factor is that many victims have adapted survival skills that create a barrier between them and those who are trying to help.

Because Abilene lacks adequate housing and services specifically designed for child victims of sexual trafficking, victims are sometimes relocated. However, moving underage victims away from home results in separation from family, friends, and familiar surroundings. This separation increases the risk of them running away and becoming homeless. Homelessness increases the likelihood that they will once again be victimized (Klatt et al., 2014).

Because trafficking victims are typically survivors of multiple traumatic events, (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Lederer & Wetzel, 2014) many of them have adapted a set of survival skills (Menaker & Franklin, 2013). Unfortunately, these survival skills can work against the victims (Farrell et al., 2014; Menaker & Franklin, 2013). Many victims are commonly described as untrusting of authority, manipulative, oppositional, and defiant. Many times, child victims of sexual trafficking are homeless and engage in illegal activities in order to survive. Oppositional-defiant behaviors or engagement in criminal activities reinforces the negative attitudes that many citizens and many law enforcement

personnel have toward these child-victims. Sometimes victims are misidentified as criminals (Farrell et al., 2014) and are confined in juvenile facilities where they may be further victimized.

Implications For Social Work

Social workers can play a key role in advocacy for victims of human trafficking. One of the core social work ethical principles is respecting the dignity and worth of all people (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2022). However, victims of human trafficking are frequently viewed by the public as criminals rather than human beings who have been exploited. Law enforcement personnel also widely hold these views. Therefore, social workers should engage in efforts to change public attitudes. Research shows that gaining knowledge of victims' exploitation histories can reduce the blameworthiness attributed to their behavior (Menaker & Franklin, 2013). Social workers can promote educational campaigns to educate professionals about sexual exploitation.

Accurate identification of sexual trafficking victims depends to some degree on receiving specific training about circumstances and behaviors that indicate victimization. Social workers who are likely to encounter this population should obtain education about the use of screening tools such as the CSE-IT. In addition, social workers who work directly with trafficking victims should understand that these victims are likely survivors of multiple traumatic events (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Sprang & Cole, 2018). Sex trafficking often involves serious and repeated violations of safety and trust and result in serious psychosocial injury. Complex posttraumatic stress due to repeated exposure to psychosocial trauma in childhood is associated with multiple severe impairments across multiple affective and interpersonal domains (Sprang & Cole, 2018). Therefore, social

workers working with this population should be trained to work with victims of complex posttraumatic stress.

Implication For Further Research

According to a survivor, “even people who were aware of sex trafficking did not fully understand the complexity of the issue, and the involvement of drugs, manipulation, and violence in sex trafficking” (Rajaram & Tidball, 2018). Although many of the respondents in the study understand what human trafficking victims went through, a further study might be needed to understand if care providers understand the trauma that many victims of trafficking go through. Furthermore, survivors’ opinions would need to be evaluated to truly understand the strength and weaknesses of the systems within Abilene to know if they work to help survivors.

One of the problems that respondents highlighted was that the unavailability of local housing, specifically designed for child sexual trafficking victims, resulted in victims being moved out of town. Moving them out of town produces an additional problem with victims running away from those out-of-town facilities. Further research might be beneficial in understanding this runaway behavior. Exploring the relationship between the location of the placement the proximity to victims’ homes could help to better understand the likelihood of victims running away from such facilities.

Implication For Policy

To help victims of human trafficking, various policies can be implemented that address preventative methods to limit human trafficking and help victims. One such policy is meeting the need of people of vulnerable populations. As indicated in the literature review and respondents’ responses, many people engage in trafficking to meet

their basic needs. Government institutions can increase investment in neighborhoods and societies that suffering from drug abuse, violence, etc. In addition, governments should look at the causes of push factors and pull factors that might cause a child to run away. To help stop human trafficking, local governments like Abilene should initiate an educational policy that would teach students about online safety and human trafficking. During the cause of the study, respondents indicated that online trafficking and exploitation were becoming more common. The city of Abilene needs to improve online safety education among schools. Furthermore, to help victims of human trafficking, Abilene needs to improve various trauma-informed training among various staff in its systems. This might make it easier to both help and detect human trafficking victims. Lastly, as indicated by various respondents, the lack of housing that is geared towards helping either homeless youth or human trafficking needs to improve. Providing housing to homeless youth can put them at a lesser risk to human trafficking. In addition, having housing for human trafficking victims in Abilene might help with the healing process for the victims as they are near the system of care that is both helping and are familiar with.

Limitation

There are various limitations in the study that should be noted. For example, many of the respondents had interactions with victims of human trafficking. The results of the study might have differed if respondents did not have interaction with victims of human trafficking. For example, Respondent 4 stated that not everyone that they worked with was trained to notice or talk to victims of human trafficking. The results of the study could have been different if more diverse candidates within the organization were interviewed.

In addition, the researcher's biases played a role in determining what questions were asked and how it was included in the study. For example, more emphasis in the question could have been focused on questions respondents felt about human trafficking victims especially if they did not were accepting of the care provided.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to understand the perception of people who work with human trafficking victims as well as the procedures that are in place to help detect and provide services to human trafficking victims. Although there is a lack of data that states the number of human trafficking victims in Abilene, most of the respondents believed that it was a problem. To find more trafficking victims, respondents were hopeful of detecting more victims through the implementation of the CSE-IT tool.

The implementation of the CSE-IT tool across different agencies could help both detect and help youth who are in danger of being trafficked. When it comes to services, the introduction of the care coordination team could help with making sure that victims of human trafficking are receiving the best service possible. However, there are certain services, such as housing for human trafficking victims and vulnerable youth, which are still lacking.

Among the different systems that work with human trafficking victims in Abilene, there appears to be a good understanding of who a human trafficking victim is; however, that might not always translate to services that are geared towards fully helping a client. To better understand the needs of victims, there needs to be greater training that does not just talk about the experience of a human trafficking victim but the trauma that they face and how that trauma may alter their behavior.

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APPENDIX

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885



November 12, 2021

Joshua Meribole
Department of Social Work
ACU Box 27866
Abilene Christian University

Dear Joshua,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "How does the perception of human trafficking affect the different detection protocols and procedures that victims experience?",

(IRB# 21-153) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs