MARYLAND VOLUNTEER LAWYERS SERVICE

FACT OR FICTION: DECODING HUMAN TRAFFICKING STATISTICS

HTPP
The Human Trafficking Prevention Project

High-quality data on human trafficking is essential because there is no accurate estimate of human trafficking in the United States.

TYPES OF RESEARCH NEEDED FOR VICTIM IDENTIFICATION AND EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

Victim Demographics: Research data on victim demographics is necessary and helps us understand victim identity and prevalence. Prevalence explains how many people are experiencing trafficking, which helps determine how much attention and resources we should commit to it. This helps plan anti-trafficking programming, including how many clients to prepare for, how many shelter beds are needed, or how many therapists to include in a program to serve survivors. To better understanding who is being victimized, one can ask:

- At what age are victims first trafficked?
- What is the racial-ethnic makeup of victims?
- How many identified survivors were involved in the child welfare system before being trafficked?

Understanding victim demographics helps plan effective and responsive programs. For example,

- If 90% of identified victims in an area speak Spanish, a program will know they need to hire primarily bilingual staff.
- If 60% of identified female trafficking victims in a county are people of color, even though people of color only make up 30% of the County's population, practitioners can then say they are seeing a disproportionate number of people of color affected by trafficking.

Intervention Efficacy: There are many ways to prevent, identify, and respond to victims of trafficking. These efforts are referred to as "interventions." Evidenced-based research should influence what interventions are implemented by organization; for example, an agency that starts using a trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapeutic modality during counseling with survivors of trafficking who are trying to lessen trauma symptoms, or a school system that implements a human trafficking training curriculum for teachers and students in the hope of preventing students from being trafficked.

Anti-trafficking programs need accurate victim demographic data to create effective interventions and to review the effectiveness of their programming. If organizations use interventions that are not evidence-based, they risk wasting precious time and resources and, at worst, perpetuating harm.

Policy Analysis: While anti-trafficking organizations and Task Forces may have good intentions regarding the legislation they want to pass, they often fail to consider whether their proposed legislation may produce unintended consequences for other marginalized groups, or whether the change they seek can truly be made through legislation. Policy change requires evidence to ensure the proposed policies work in similar settings or with a comparable population.

CHALLENGES TO DATA REPORTING - WHY IS IT SO HARD TO FIND CREDIBLE DATA?

Unfortunately, sensational and attention-grabbing myths prevail - for example:

- In 2009, a national non-profit organization asserted, "*research has shown that the average age of entry into prostitution and pornography is 12*." The statement is attention-grabbing and alarming, and organizations, politicians, and others continue to use it. Yet the statement has no context and no information on where it comes from. Researchers have tried to find the source but have been unable to find a credible source for this claim.

- A U.S. Department of Health and Human Services webpage (Department of Health and Human Services, 2015) asserted that *runaway and homeless youth are solicited for sex within 72 hours* of being on the street. The National Center for Homeless Education shortened the time window, reporting that as many as one-third of teen runaways or throwaway youth will become involved in prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home; Fox News Milwaukee sensationalized the story, increasing the number of victims to 90 percent of runaways became involved in prostitution within 48 hours.

Kids facing unstable housing or who leave home are at increased risk for being trafficked. But, like a game of telephone, a little bit of data surfaces and is picked and tweaked, eventually resulting in something that might have been research-based but is now wildly exaggerated. **When we say things that aren't true, people stop believing, and credibility is lost.**

Why is it so hard to find credible data?

- ***Individual level factors*** -- Victims don't want to self-identify because they may not know that what's happening to them is a crime. Trafficking survivors may fear retaliation from traffickers or repercussions from law enforcement. For example, the HTPP has worked with survivors that have informed law enforcement and then arrested for crimes committed while they were trafficked.
- ***Organization and sectoral silos*** -- Victim services agencies keep data, law enforcement keeps data, and prosecutors have another kind of set of data (how many were prosecuted and how many were incarcerated), and it is often hard if not impossible to know if there is overlap in victim reporting.
- ***Different definitions*** - There are differences in definitions of trafficking and victimization across states and sectors, making aggregating data sets challenging. For example, across the U.S., law enforcement, prosecutors, and service providers may use different definitions, data collection procedures, and record keeping timeframes, which makes data aggregation difficult to impossible.
- ***Confidentiality laws*** – These are hugely important, but they put limits on information sharing. For example, ten service providers may report serving ten clients. But they cannot say that 100 people were served because providers might have served the same people. By rightly not sharing identifying information, it becomes very challenging to know if there is overlap between clients served by different agencies.

TIPS FOR IMPROVING DATA REPORTING

1. **CHECK YOUR WORK.** Make sure your training and presentations **ALWAYS** include citations and references lists are available for participants.
2. **QUESTION EVERYTHING.** Question human trafficking statistics and **READ** the original research yourself. Check the data, how old are the sources, where does the information come from, how big was the sample size?
3. **BE SPECIFIC**. Instead of “Hundreds of thousands of kids are trafficked each year!”, **BE SPECIFIC**: “in 2019, Maryland identified ___ youth as victims of trafficking according to __source__.”
4. **INSTITUTE AGENCY CHANGES.** Create a sustainable way for your organization, agency, taskforce, etc. to **stay up to date on the latest research**.
5. **ACKNOWLEDGE THE UNKNOWN. Avoid generalizations** or guessing; remember we can never see the entire population.

This tip sheet was created as a part of the Human Trafficking Prevention Project (HTPP), working in partnership with the Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service (MVLS).

Principles on this tip sheet are adapted from the HTPP webinar:
“Fact or Fiction: Decoding Human Trafficking Statistics,” available at www.mvlslaw.org/ht/resources.

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