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The Value of Human Trafficking Awareness – November 2022

SUMMARY

The Problem

- Human trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act that is induced by force, fraud, or coercion.
- Globally, there are 24.9 million victims of human trafficking at any given time.

Myths and Methods

- The most pervasive myth about human trafficking is that it often involves kidnapping or physical force.
- Victims can be recruited by intimate partners or spouses, family members, friends, or benefactors who use psychological means such as deception, manipulation, or threats to compel commercial sex or exploitative labor.

Prosecution Challenges

- Many states do not mirror federal law when prosecuting the act of “purchasing” or “patronizing” a minor for sex, allowing traffickers to continually utilize complex, ever-changing tactics to avoid prosecution.
- Case presentations are often complicated by ambiguous legal language and require significant timeframes for resolution.

The Need for Anti-Trafficking Prevention Education

- The hidden nature of the crime is challenging to identify, and victims frequently do not apply the term trafficking as an event that they are experiencing.
- Effective public awareness and outreach efforts can lead to the detection of human trafficking cases, build public support for governments and communities to act, and ultimately help prevent human trafficking.

The Economic Impact of Human Trafficking

- Human trafficking, estimated to be one of the most profitable crimes in the world, generates $150 billion in illegal profits per year.
- In 2021, the United States Justice Department’s Office of Justice Programs (OJP) provided almost $87 million in funding to combat human trafficking.
- Potential loss of lifetime earnings, local spending, law enforcement efforts, healthcare service provisions to victims, and tax contributions to the state/localities are crucial data points typically omitted from economic impact estimates.

Prevention and Next Steps

- Engage with anti-trafficking organizations to increase awareness and understanding through education.
- Volunteer at places that serve victims, join a coalition, and/or be an advocate for policy and legislative action.
- Participate in trainings that go beyond simply “learning the signs of abuse.” Understand the real story of trafficking, especially of those most vulnerable.

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The Problem

The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 (P.L. 106–386) defines sex trafficking as, "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act that is induced by force, fraud, or coercion" (TVPA, 2000, p.8). It is an insidious crime of exploitation that generates public health concerns and human rights violations. It affects individuals, families, and communities across generations resulting in lifelong consequences for victims and communities around the world. Human trafficking occurs in all 50 states and at least 121 countries (United Nations, 2016). Victims can be recruited and trafficked in their hometowns and even their own homes. It compromises justice and economic security, undermines the rule of law and fundamental principles of dignity, and harms the well-being of individuals and communities everywhere. With an estimated 24.9 million victims worldwide at any given time, human traffickers prey on adults and children of all genders, ages, backgrounds, and nationalities, exploiting them for profit and compelling them to perform labor or to engage in commercial sex (U.S. State Department, 2022).

Traffickers may be intimate partners or spouses of the victims, family members, friends, or benefactors. Traffickers target vulnerable people who have needs they can fill, such as housing, material goods, emotional support, or a sense of belonging (Chen, 2021). The most pervasive myth about human trafficking is that it often involves kidnapping or physically forcing someone into a situation. In truth, most traffickers use psychological means such as tricking, manipulating or threatening victims into providing commercial sex or exploitative labor. Enduring misconceptions about human trafficking have helped misinformation and rumors about the crime spread rapidly. The spread of misinformation about human trafficking also means that anti-trafficking experts and organizations need to allocate time and resources to re-educate the public. Doing so takes time away from critical services including responding to survivors seeking help. Resources for these organizations are often already strained and should be directed towards evidence-based solutions to combat human trafficking (U.S. State Department, 2021).

Traffickers' Methods

Traffickers use a multitude of methods to recruit, coerce, and exploit victims in both forced labor and commercial sex trafficking. This occurs through social media platforms, web-based messaging apps, online chat rooms, dating apps, classified advertisements, and job boards. As stated by the Federal Human Trafficking Report, (2021, p. 52), "one might think …of commercial sex as traditionally taking place in side streets or back alleys. While streets or tracks that are known for offering commercial sex still exist in cities across the country, data extracted from human trafficking cases filed in Federal Courts show that most of the solicitation of commercial sex takes place behind the safety and anonymity of a computer screen." Of note, defendants accused of criminal sex trafficking charges used the internet as their primary method of soliciting buyers in 85% of the new cases filed (Vore et al, 2021).

Prosecution Challenges

As traffickers continually utilize unique, often complex, and ever-changing tactics to exploit victims, prosecution against traffickers remains difficult. There are significant challenges within the justice system regarding persecution of traffickers. For example, case presentations are often complicated by ambiguous legal language. Additionally, many states do not mirror federal law, especially relating to the need for the equivalent application of criminalizing the act of buyers for "purchasing" or "patronizing" a minor for sex (Shared Hope International, 2022). Other justice impediments include the significant amount of time required for case resolution. This may be attributed to the various complexities associated with trauma coerced attachment (TCA) also known as trauma bonding. TCA is an emotional attachment between an abuser and victim. Trauma bonds in sex trafficking compel victims to submit to continued exploitation and protection of the trafficker (Casassa et al, 2022). TCA can lead to the survivor taking responsibility for the abuser's crimes and even protecting them from legal or social repercussions. This type of attachment can continue even after the relationship between survivor and abuser has ended and can result in behavior that is difficult to predict and understand by others (Chambers et al, 2022). Additional mitigating variables in the pursuit of prosecution include countries who do not give victims the protection they need, so they are reluctant to cooperate with law enforcement. Victims both domestically are internationally may be afraid their traffickers will harm them or their families, or do not trust the authorities that are questioning them. Other barriers contributing to victim nondisclosure include a sense of shame, fear of retaliation, fear of arrest, threats of harm, and fear of the healthcare system (Camak, 2022).

The Need for Anti-Trafficking Prevention Education

Awareness training provides an important foundation for parents/caregivers, first responders, service providers, educators, churches, and others to recognize the indicators of human trafficking and learn how to respond appropriately. Human trafficking education provides tools to observe the warning signs and identify these tactics for what they are - attempts to lure the vulnerable. Per the US Department of State, "Effective public awareness and outreach efforts can lead to the detection of human trafficking cases, build public support for governments and communities to act, and ultimately help prevent human trafficking. The primary goals of outreach and awareness-raising should also identify new resources, generate political will and support for the issue (OVC TTAC, 2022). "Further, the goals of anti-trafficking trainings are to increase trainees' overall knowledge of human trafficking, reduce the endorsement of common trafficking myths, bolster victim identification and increase reporting of suspensions" (Miller et al, 2021). Awareness and understanding remain two of the most common challenges law enforcement face in responding to human trafficking. Although progress has been made, the hidden nature of the crime creates a challenge when attempting to identify victims. In many cases, victims do not understand the situation they are in and are often left feeling hopeless in a cycle of trafficking and abuse, unsure of available resources and support (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2022).

The Economic Impact of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking carries heavy economic impacts that are not often discussed. It erodes the safety and health of our transportation networks, the security of our borders, the strength of our economy, and the rule of law (U.S. Government, 2021). It is a billion-dollar industry impacting hundreds of thousands of individuals each year. The United States alone spends millions of dollars annually on law enforcement programs designated to combat human trafficking. In 2021, the United States Justice Department's Office of Justice Programs (OJP) provided almost $87 million in funding to combat human trafficking, providing support services to trafficking victims through the United States and conducting research in the nature and causes of labor and sex trafficking. Along with illegal arms and drug trafficking, human trafficking is one of the largest international crime industries in the world. A report from the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2014) stated forced labor generates $150 billion in illegal profits per year. Two-thirds of that money comes from commercial sexual exploitation, while the rest is from forced economic exploitation, including domestic work, agriculture, child labor and related activities. In addition to its enormous human cost, human trafficking is estimated to be one of the most profitable crimes in the world (U.S. Treasury Department, 2021).

According to the US Department of Transportation and Vanderbilt University (2022), the average Value of Statistical Life (VSL) ranges between $9.6 million and $11 million. Applying this figure to the number of human trafficking victims nationwide, a grand total of $110 billion for the monetary value of reducing risk to these lives is achieved. Although not presently explored in this report, a more accurate and thorough way of calculating the economic costs of human trafficking to victims and the nation would be to quantify the potential loss of lifetime earnings, local spending, and tax contributions to the to the state/localities when illicit activity occurs. Factoring in the public cost of anti-trafficking, law enforcement efforts and providing healthcare services to victims would also be crucial to estimates.

Prevention and Next Steps

The first step in reducing human trafficking is to become acquainted with local and national anti-trafficking organizations and increase awareness and understanding through education. Next, taking advantage of opportunities to volunteer at places such as drop-in centers, domestic violence shelters, homeless shelters, and food pantries that share cross-over services to victims. It is not always necessary to volunteer in programs specific to human trafficking. One can also join a coalition, and/or be an advocate for policy and legislative action. Another method of prevention is participating in frequent and relevant anti-trafficking trainings that go beyond simply "learning the signs of abuse." Specifically, without some context, these "signs" are not meaningful identifiers of trafficking (Polaris, 2022). Instead of merely recognizing the signs, it is important to understand the real story of trafficking especially of those most vulnerable (addictions, recent immigrants, people facing poverty, and people with a history of trauma and abuse such as foster care children and youth, LGBTQ youth). Understanding the "story" mitigates biased assumptions related to race. It is essential to learn about that person's situation and remember, victims frequently do not apply the term trafficking as an event that they are experiencing.

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