Growing our Skills: Recognizing Minors who are Victims of Sex Trafficking

A Research Brief

January 2015

by

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It seems communities are all abuzz about human trafficking. There are human trafficking task forces forming in cities across the country due, at least in part, to grassroots efforts. Human trafficking has mobilized community members in a way that our field has not seen in a long time.

January has been designated by President Obama as “Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month” with governors and mayors signing proclamations and having their pictures taken with advocates. The media is calling children’s advocacy centers (CACs) and multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) to comment on human trafficking.

Human trafficking is a broad term. The focus for CACs and MDTs is sex trafficking of minors. This form of victimization is a subset of the overall problem of child sexual abuse.

Data is hard to come by for a meaningful description of sex trafficking as it relates to minors in the United States. Research does indicate there is a strong association with child sexual abuse and sex trafficking of minors (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2013). There is no recent research to estimate the number of minors victimized by human trafficking or an estimate for the number of minors at risk.

Most state and local systems (child protective services, law enforcement, and prosecution) do not have human trafficking as an entry in their databases to capture the information. Consistent definitions are needed for clarity. To complicate matters, human trafficking is not one crime. In addition, the lack of human trafficking departmental policies and/or specialized training is also a problem. This makes it difficult to recognize and help victims.

The Committee on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States, comprised of leaders in our field, has concluded:

- There is substantial and compelling evidence the problems are serious with immediate and long-term adverse consequences
- Prevention efforts are essential but largely absent
- Identification and response efforts are emerging, but are largely under supported, insufficient, uncoordinated, and unevaluated
- All efforts require collaborative approaches
- Efforts need to confront demand and the individuals who commit and benefit from these crimes (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2013).
So, what can be done? CACs and MDTs can focus on the sex trafficking of minors. Professionals can read research articles, get training, update agency databases to include human trafficking, and develop policies and protocols. Here are some helpful resources:

- The National Children’s Advocacy Center provides a collection of reports, research and other publications in The Child Abuse Library Online (CALiO™)

- The 31st International Symposium on Child Abuse is an excellent opportunity to receive human trafficking training. Numerous workshops will be presented on child sex trafficking and child sexual exploitation topics. A list of workshops may be found at the link above.

Professionals know how to do this; we just have to broaden our skills to appropriately serve children who are victims of sex trafficking. They are already in our caseloads. We need to see them as this type of victim and adapt our services.

References