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Human Trafficking in Ohio

Markets, Responses, and
Considerations

Jeremy M. Wilson, Erin Dalton

Supported by the Ohio Association of Chiefs of Police



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1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138
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Summary

Introduction

Fueled partly by media attention, there has been a growing focus on human trafficking in the United States, a focus that has grown significantly in the past decade. In the United States, this growing interest culminated in the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), which was signed into law in October 2000. This act and its subsequent 2003 and 2005 reauthorizations are the main tools used in combating both domestic and worldwide human trafficking.

The growing interest in human trafficking has also spurred an interest in research. Unfortunately, existing research on human trafficking has yet to move the field beyond estimating the scale of the problem; mapping relationships among origin, transport, and destination countries; and analyzing policy responses to it. Such research is limited by a lack of consensus on the definition of *human trafficking* and by the operationalization of that definition, by the nature of the population itself, and by the difficulty of determining how to count human-trafficking victims. Given these problems, much of the existing research on trafficking attempts to show that it is a problem and to give a snapshot of that problem by relying on overviews, commentaries, and anecdotal information.

This assessment explores the existence and characteristics of human trafficking in Ohio, with a focus on the extent to which human trafficking occurs (its existence), characteristics (limited to concrete cases for which there is evidence supporting a trafficking offense), and the awareness and response of the criminal justice and social service communities to human trafficking. The study examines two urban

communities—Columbus and Toledo—to explore the characteristics of and response to human trafficking in Ohio, relying on a content analysis of newspaper accounts and key respondent interviews with criminal justice officials and social service providers in each site.

Existence of Human Trafficking in Case Study Sites

Focusing on concrete cases identified in the content analysis (January 2003 through June 2006) and in the interviews (February through July 2007), we identified 15 cases in the two case study sites. Our identification of concrete cases should be interpreted as a minimum baseline or lower-bound estimate of human trafficking. Although there are few identified cases relative to other crimes, most respondents believe that the problem is significantly larger than they know of: Some suggested that there are as many as three to 10 trafficking victims of this type for every one identified. There are dozens of traffickers currently under investigation in one of the case study sites, and there is some evidence that the size of the problem may be increasing or may have increased in recent years. For example, one respondent suggested that, as recently as the 1980s, it was against all norms to involve a child in prostitution; today, it is the norm, within prostitution rings. However, many respondents felt that the issue has always existed but that there is increased awareness of it today.

There were two types of human-trafficking markets identified in the case study sites. The first trafficking market centered on juvenile prostitution, which numerous newspaper articles and respondents in Toledo identified. Respondents identified this market in Columbus, although they could not provide any specific case information. The second trafficking market centered on labor, which was not found in Toledo but was identified by four respondents (representing two agencies) in Columbus. Given the small number of cases, there is very little basis for comparison between the two sites.

Justice System Response in Case Study Sites

Columbus and Toledo have considerably different responses to juvenile sex-trafficking cases. In Columbus, there is almost no awareness that human trafficking can involve juveniles in commercial sex transactions from which an adult benefits. This lack of awareness, coupled with lack of resources, lack of local and federal law enforcement collaboration, lack of dedicated staff or a dedicated unit to handle trafficking cases, and lack of systematic community–service provider partnerships, leads to handling potential human-trafficking victims as offenders, which may partly lead to the lack of identified human-trafficking cases in the jurisdiction.

In Toledo, the criminal justice community has made significant changes to promote awareness, identification, and investigation of human-trafficking cases. Federal resources and collaborations among federal, state, and local law enforcement and service providers have helped facilitate this change. Local law enforcement respondents (n = 3) claimed that these changes have led to the increase in the number of cases investigated and prosecuted in Toledo involving Toledo-area actors.

In both Toledo and Columbus, there is a reported disconnect between the justice system’s and the child welfare system’s responses to juvenile sex-trafficking cases, which may hinder the identification and prosecution of cases.

Law enforcement authorities were not made aware of the few known labor-trafficking cases in Columbus, and there were no known cases in Toledo. However, law enforcement agencies in both communities suggested that they would respond to such cases if they were made aware of them.

Social Service Provider and Community Response in Case Study Sites

In Columbus, there is little identification of human-trafficking cases. As such, little response was seen by service providers or by the com-

munity, with the exception of one provider that has seen a few victims of labor exploitation. Furthermore, there is no awareness of possible juvenile sex-trafficking victims in Columbus, despite the broad consideration of the issue in Toledo. Despite this, respondents in Columbus indicated that, if they identified a human-trafficking victim, they would make partnerships and use their existing networks to serve the victim.

In Toledo, there has been a considerable reaction and response to juvenile trafficking victims by the community. While these programs are still small and struggling and may only be prepared to address juvenile victims, compared to Columbus, Toledo has an extensive, organized, and collaborative approach to dealing with human-trafficking victims.

As such, the only similarities found between the two case study sites were the need for more shelter options for victims of human trafficking and the disconnect between the child welfare and juvenile justice systems' treatment of children and families with possible connections to human trafficking.

Key Policy Considerations

Given the relatively small number of cases we identified, policymakers and practitioners must carefully weigh their response to this crime relative to other priorities. Providing resources, in whatever form, to more effectively address one type of offense necessarily limits resources that can be used to address another.

Despite the small number of concrete cases we identified, there are several factors that warrant, at a minimum, further discussion about response options. First, our identification of concrete cases should be interpreted as a minimum baseline or lower-bound estimate of human trafficking. It is possible that additional cases exist in other areas of Ohio, possibly even in Columbus and Toledo, or that cases involving victims and offenders from Ohio appear elsewhere in the United States. Second, each case can involve numerous victims and offenders (six cases currently being investigated in Toledo involve as many

as 60 traffickers). Third, this offense has existed as a crime only since 2000, and changing traditional practices takes both time and training. Finally, human trafficking is a clandestine crime; directing more resources toward it and increasing awareness of it generally coincide with the identification of more cases.

If policymakers and practitioners want to improve on the current response to human trafficking, our analysis offers several suggestions:

- Improve awareness and response through training, education, and outreach.
- Improve victim programs and resources.
- Improve law enforcement capacity.
- Improve practitioner collaboration.
- Refine departmental policies.
- Use analyses to develop evidence-based programs and responses.
- Consider and assess legislative, legal, and regulatory changes.