



Human trafficking and the child welfare population in Florida

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A B S T R A C T

Human trafficking victimization is frequently associated with child abuse or neglect and out-of-home placements. This article presents the largest study to date of human trafficking allegations within a child welfare context, and one of the few to compare children with allegations of human trafficking to others in the child welfare population. It uses state administrative data to examine 4413 allegations of sex and labor trafficking involving 3420 children. These children were more than twice as likely as others to have experienced prior maltreatment. Among children with prior child welfare experience, those with trafficking allegations were twice as likely to have experienced out-of-home placements, > 5 times as likely to have experienced congregated care, and > 10 times as likely to have run away from placements. Although these data cannot be interpreted as representing the true prevalence of human trafficking within the child welfare population, they expand our understanding of known victims, with associated implications for research, practice and policy.

1. Introduction and background

Attention to human trafficking has surged in recent years, particularly with respect to trafficking of children. As defined by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (Public Law 106–386),¹ human trafficking includes the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain labor or commercial sex. Commercial sex is defined as the exchange of any sexual act for something of value, including money, shelter, or protection. The TVPA stipulates that force, fraud, or coercion need not be present to establish sex trafficking if the victim is < 18 years of age. The definition of labor trafficking does not vary by age.

Recent systematic reviews of the literature identify child maltreatment as a prominent risk factor for minor sex trafficking victimization (Choi, 2015). The nature of this relationship is not clear. Evidence suggests that it reflects root causes of child maltreatment, such as dysfunctional family relationships and unsafe environments, and reflects sequelae of maltreatment, such as difficulties in coping and relationships, risky noncommercial sexual behaviors, substance use, and runaway episodes (Choi, 2015; Clayton, Krugman, & Simon, 2013; Wilson & Widom, 2010). However, research in this area is frequently limited by an exclusive focus on sex trafficking; small samples; retrospective data collection; and inconsistent definitions of trafficking, child maltreatment, and child welfare involvement. Better understanding of risk factors for minor victim trafficking is needed to inform the development, implementation, and evaluation of prevention and intervention strategies for child victims (Clayton et al., 2013).

Therefore, this article uses child welfare administrative data to describe > 4000 human trafficking allegations and the demographic characteristics, maltreatment histories, and child welfare histories of the children who are the subjects of these allegations.

1.1. Human trafficking, child maltreatment, and the child welfare population

Human trafficking is frequently associated with child maltreatment, particularly sexual abuse. Several studies have found a history of child sexual abuse to predict commercial sexual exploitation (Lavoie, Thibodeau, Gagne, & Hebert, 2010; Marshall, Shannon, Kerr, Zhang, & Wood, 2010; Reid & Piquero, 2014a; Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001; Ulloa, Salazar, & Monjaras, 2016; Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, Tyler, & Johnson, 2004). The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that youth who were sexually abused in childhood were 3.23 times more likely than other youth to exchange sex for money, drugs, food, or shelter (Ulloa et al., 2016). Tyler et al. (2001) found that early sexual abuse was associated with survival sex, a term often used when commercial sex occurs in response to immediate financial needs (Walls & Bell, 2011).

Other studies have found significant associations between human trafficking and maltreatment other than sexual abuse (Roe-Sepowitz, 2012; Tyler, Gervais, & Davidson, 2013). For example, Ulloa et al. (2016) found that youth who had experienced multiple types of abuse were 1.24 times more likely to exchange sex than those who had not.

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¹ Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 and subsequent reauthorizations, commonly referred to as the Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

Females who had experienced two or more types of abuse in childhood were 1.33 times more likely to exchange sex than those without a history of multiple forms of victimization. Reid and Piquero (2014a) identified several neglect-related risk factors that were significantly associated with commercial sexual exploitation, including maternal drug problems, lack of food, and lack of love. Analyses using structural equation have found that child maltreatment history is linked to running away, early substance use, and higher levels of sexual denigration of self/others, which was in turn significantly related to the likelihood of what the author classified as “prostitution as a minor” (Reid, 2011).

Research has also identified associations between human trafficking and child welfare system involvement. Numerous studies have identified high levels of child welfare history among youth identified as trafficked, using data from victim service programs, child advocacy centers, and juvenile justice services (e.g., Piening & Cross, 2012; Roe-Sepowitz, Bracy, Massengale, Cantelme, & Ward, 2015; Salisbury, Dabney, & Russell, 2015; Varma, Gillespie, McCracken, & Greenbaum, 2015). Studies describing child welfare system involvement report high levels of foster care experience among child victims of trafficking (Rosenblatt, 2014; Walker, 2013; WestCoast Children's Clinic, 2012). Among adult women engaged in prostitution, nearly half reported foster care history (Farley, 2003), and those with foster care history were likely to have begun sex work before age 18 (Surratt & Kurtz, 2012).

Few studies have examined trafficking within child welfare populations, despite frequent associations between trafficking and child maltreatment or child welfare system involvement. Havlicek, Huston, Boughton, and Zhang (2016) provide the most detailed examination to date of human trafficking victims identified by the child welfare system. The analysis used administrative data from the Illinois child welfare agency to describe the 568 youth (out of 697,062) who were the subjects of human trafficking allegations, including both sex and labor trafficking, between 2011 and 2015. Of those, 28% had experienced one or more episodes of out-of-home care, and 45% of these had experienced trafficking allegations during out-of-home care episodes. In the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth, 5% of youth reported having exchanged sex for something of value (Ahrens, Katon, McCarty, Richardson, & Courtney, 2012). Other studies set within a child protection context include descriptive studies of a residential program for trafficked children within the child welfare system (Armstrong, Johnson, Landers, Dollard, & Anderson, 2016), children being assessed for possible trafficking victimization in a child welfare setting (Smith, 2011), and in child advocacy centers (Edinburgh, Pape-Blabolil, Harpin, & Saewyc, 2015; Miller, 2014).

Labor trafficking among domestic minors has received far less attention than sex trafficking, particularly within the child welfare population. The Polaris Project (2015) reports that among > 400 reported cases of likely labor trafficking involving traveling sales crews, one-third were believed to involve minors. A study of homeless youth found that 10% of respondents with histories of foster care reported labor trafficking victimization (Murphy, 2016). Although coerced labor occurred in a variety of situations, most were instances of forced drug sales, as has been noted elsewhere (Gibbs, Hardison Walters, Lutnick, Miller, & Kluckman, 2015). Federal guidance to child welfare agencies notes that child labor trafficking has also been identified in agricultural work, restaurants, and begging rings (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, 2013).

Our understanding of the relationship between human trafficking and the child welfare population remains limited. Research on this relationship is inherently challenged by the covert nature of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, stigmatization and vulnerability of victims, and lack of clear screening procedures for trafficking victimization (Walker & Quraishi, 2014). In addition, recognition of human trafficking is relatively recent within child welfare policy and practice; allegation categories have been implemented only recently in most

states, and only one screening tool has been validated in child welfare settings (Dank et al., 2017).

With respect to design, studies that have examined human trafficking victimization among child welfare populations tend to use cross-sectional designs, rely on retrospective case reviews or qualitative methods, or collect data from small samples. Studies relying on self-reports of child maltreatment and trafficking victimization are subject to a number of methodological limitations, including whether respondents recognize their experience as abusive, and variations in recall periods, screening approaches, and response options (for a review of these issues, see Latzman, Casanueva, & Dolan, 2017). Relatively few studies include comparison groups (exceptions include Cole, Sprang, Lee, & Cohen, 2016; Fedina, Williamson, & Perdue, 2016; Reid, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2014; Saewyc, Solvig, & Edinburgh, 2008; Surratt & Kurtz, 2012; Varma et al., 2015). With respect to measurement, many reports lack information on how variables are measured or the temporal relationship between trafficking and associated variables (exceptions include Havlicek et al., 2016; Ulloa et al., 2016). Child maltreatment and child welfare system variables are often reported dichotomously (e.g., experienced or did not experience maltreatment) or fail to describe age at first maltreatment, age of removal from home, or duration of child welfare system involvement (exceptions include Farley et al., 2016; Warf et al., 2013).

1.2. Child welfare system response to human trafficking

Recent federal legislation defines the role of the child welfare system in response to human trafficking of children. The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 (Public Law 113–183) amended the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (Public Law 93–274 and subsequent revisions) to require state child welfare agencies to establish policies and procedures to identify, document, screen, and define services for children under their supervision who are victims of, or at risk of, sex trafficking. The law also requires that child welfare systems implement protocols for locating children who are missing from out-of-home care and assess whether they have experienced trafficking victimization while missing. The Act is specific to sex trafficking, although earlier federal guidance to child welfare agencies defined both sex and labor trafficking and discussed strategies for identifying and serving child victims.

The 2015 Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act (Public Law 114–82) further amended CAPTA by requiring states to consider any child sex trafficking victim as a victim of child maltreatment and to report trafficking victimization to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), the federal system documenting reports of child maltreatment. This law includes the term “severe forms of human trafficking,” which encompasses labor trafficking of minors if force, fraud or coercion are present (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015).

Florida's response to human trafficking predates the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act. Beginning in 2009, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) defined procedures for recording human trafficking made to the statewide abuse hotline, sharing reports with law enforcement, investigating allegations of human trafficking that include multidisciplinary staffing, and providing appropriate services to child victims. Florida's Safe Harbor Act, implemented in 2013, amended state law to define the state's response to human trafficking (Florida Statute § 39.001). Approximately two-thirds of states have adopted such laws (Wasch, Schilling Wolfe, Levitan, & Finck, 2016), which generally shield minors from prosecution for commercial sex acts and confirm their eligibility for victim services. Florida's law allowed minors engaged in commercial sex by minors to be considered as dependent rather than delinquent,² authorized

² In 2016, Florida Statute § 796.07 completely decriminalized commercial sex for

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