



Survivor Experiences With Law Enforcement

Key Findings and Recommendations

Community Against Sexual Harm (CASH):

Terri Galvan
Antoinette Smith
Sawan Vaden
Charity Harmon
Makayla Hines
Ashley Green
Breana Baker
Dominique Roseborough
April Grayson
Kayla Baumann

RTI International:

Kelle Barrick
Rebecca Pfeffer
Renee Mitchell

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the scope and nature of sex trafficking in a community is an important first step toward mobilizing efforts to identify and provide services to trafficking survivors. Estimating the prevalence of sex trafficking has been a perennial data challenge with profound consequences. Without empirical data, efforts to disrupt trafficking or meet the needs of its survivors are subject to public opinion—often either sensationalizing or disregarding, resulting in either too little intervention or too much. Furthermore, lack of data stymies anti-trafficking efforts to guide any strategic public health or justice approach to tackling this issue effectively.

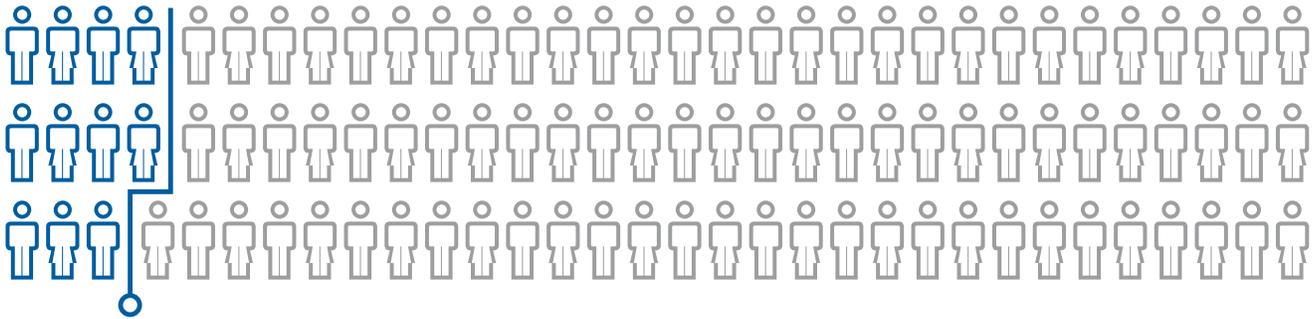
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) Estimate the prevalence of sex trafficking among adults in Sacramento County,
- 2) Better understand the nature and scope of sex trafficking in Sacramento County, and
- 3) Provide data capable of informing a strategic, coordinated, multi-system response to prevent and respond to sex trafficking exploitation in Sacramento County.

STUDY DESIGN

This study used a participatory action research approach and mixed-methods design. Multiple systems estimation, which relied on nine sources of administrative data on identified sex trafficking victims/survivors, was used to generate a prevalence estimate. Sex trafficking is defined, according to U.S. federal law, as circumstances in which “a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age” (106th U.S. Congress, 2000). Semistructured interviews were conducted with 159 sex trafficking victims and survivors in Sacramento County who were identified using a respondent-driven sampling design to gather more contextual information about sex trafficking exploitation and the needs of victims and survivors.

We estimated that that there were 13,079 minor and adult sex trafficking victims in Sacramento County in the period 2015–2020. This analysis suggests that there are 9.6 times more victims in the county than are identified by law enforcement or service providers.



Proportion of total sex trafficking victims identified

KEY FINDINGS

Although slightly more than half of the victims interviewed in the study had had contact with law enforcement, their treatment by law enforcement officers affected their views on law enforcement in general. It has been empirically demonstrated that an individual officer’s treatment of a citizen affects the citizen’s views of law enforcement in its entirety, which, in turn, affects their willingness to report crime. This connection is also true of victims of sex trafficking (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Tyler, 2004; Tyler & Fagan, 2008). In our study, descriptions of victims’ interactions with law enforcement included both positive interactions, where concern was shown, and negative interactions, where they were mistreated or exploited.

Law enforcement should also note these additional key pieces of data and themes from the interviews:

- Of the 156 individuals interviewed, slightly fewer than half (70) had never had police contact.
- Although some officers show concern and offer assistance, some sex trafficking victims had negative experiences (i.e., officers making disparaging remarks, suggesting that they would trade sex for the person’s freedom, or using force beyond a reasonable necessity), which may make them uncomfortable seeking help from law enforcement in the future.
- Interventions by law enforcement, including arresting the pimp, may help victims exit the lifestyle.
- When contacted by police, victims are screened for sex trafficking less than half of the time.
- Victims are unlikely to self-report at an initial screening, and those who want to leave their traffickers may need to try several times before they are successful.
- Even when victims are screened by law enforcement for sex trafficking, they often do not receive services.

Basically, [the police officer] wanted to trade sex for my freedom. I told him, “No,” and he got mad.... I ended up going to the jail. They put us all [in] this holding cell and this one officer comes and he was like, “Look at my collection of whores” and is like calling names and shit. And I’m hella close to the, um, the bars, and I was like, “What did you call me?” And he was like, “I called you a fucking whore.” And he spit in my face. This is a cop.

(Female, 31)

They told me about services, but you know, if you’re on the streets,... you probably just throw it [the brochure] away.

(Female, 24)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Law enforcement officers can help victims of sex trafficking leave the lifestyle. Although the personal experiences of both law enforcement officers and sex trafficking victims might lead officers to believe that they cannot make a difference, research shows that they can—and in multiple ways. One of the most important is in their treatment of sex trafficking victims. As the pillars of procedural justice dictate, treating all people involved in the sex trade industry with dignity and respect is imperative. Anything less can cause victims to avoid reaching out to law enforcement for help. Just like individuals suffering from an addiction, individuals in exploitative sexual relationships may need multiple contacts before they are ready to seek the assistance they need. Although the seeming lack of progress may be frustrating for law enforcement officers, being patient and maintaining a professional demeanor may help people reach out for, or accept, help when they are ready.

Additionally, at every contact with individuals involved in commercial sex, screen for sex trafficking. Once someone has been screened for sex trafficking, no matter the outcome and or the law enforcement officer's personal assessment, offer services and resources to meet the person's identified needs. Be as specific as possible when describing what is available in your community. For example, identify family shelters, respite centers, or free medical services so victims understand the type of resources they can access. Once again, while that moment may not be the right time for them to leave the lifestyle because of safety concerns, financial concerns, or other personal reasons, offering services at every contact can help establish a trusting relationship and educate victims on what resources are available for them should they decide to seek assistance.

QUICK TIPS

1. Make sure victims and traffickers are completely separated when assessing or screening. Ensure there is a physical barrier such as a wall or a separate room so that they cannot see each other.
2. When responding to a situation that has self-resolved or to a victim who no longer wants to cooperate with law enforcement, acknowledge that there was a situation that is resolved in this moment and offer resources. If possible, offer a direct line to speak with the responding officer or a human trafficking detective.
3. Ensure confidentiality for the victim. Do not disclose previous encounters with a victim in front of any other person. Do not disclose who initiated a call to law enforcement.

Show concern and offer help.

Be persistent with service referral information.

Recognize that victims may have **prior negative experiences with police.**

Expect victims **may not self-report** at screening.

Consider that **arresting a pimp may help** facilitate a victim's exit.

Accept that it **may take several tries** for a victim to leave a trafficker.

Require law enforcement training on trauma-informed education and screening approaches.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON SCREENING FOR HUMAN TRAFFICKING, VISIT

https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/otip/adult_human_trafficking_screening_tool_and_guide.pdf

FOR ADDITIONAL TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE ON RESPONDING TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING, VISIT THE FOLLOWING:

<https://www.theiacp.org/projects/anti-human-trafficking-training-and-technical-assistance>

<https://www.ovcttac.gov/views/HowWeCanHelp/dspHumanTrafficking.cfm?nm=sfa&ns=ht>

FOR DETAILED FINDINGS AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THIS STUDY, VISIT

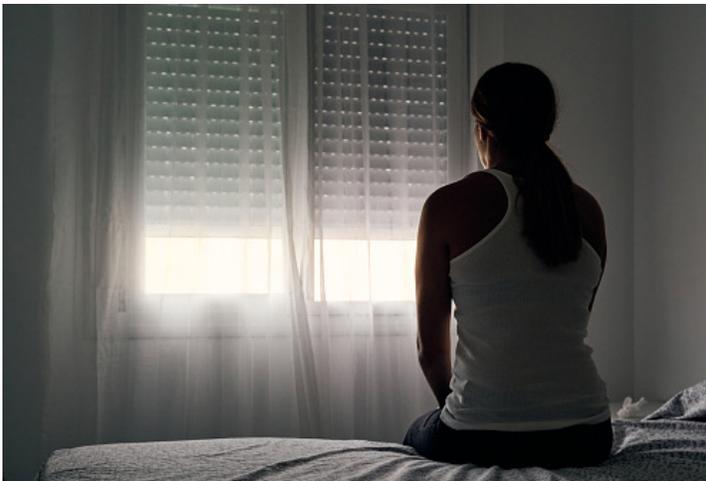
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