
Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking in the United States

Kimberly Kotrla

By now, most social workers are familiar with the issue of human trafficking. However, many are likely unfamiliar with research indicating that youths constitute the most vulnerable group in the United States for becoming victims of sex trafficking and that most women in prostitution actually entered as minors. Some experts are now referring to the sex trafficking of U.S. children and youths as “domestic minor sex trafficking,” or DMST. This article seeks to acquaint readers with what is currently known regarding the extent of DMST, who is at risk for becoming a victim, and implications for the social work profession in addressing this tragedy.

KEY WORDS: *domestic minor sex trafficking; human trafficking; modern day slavery; sex trafficking*

Attention to the issue of human trafficking has greatly increased in social work literature and the media in recent years. Cases of international sex trafficking have increased public awareness about human trafficking in the United States, yet many people remain unaware that more U.S. citizens are victims of sex trafficking than are foreign nationals (Hughes, 2007). Recent research suggests that American youths are the most vulnerable to becoming victims of sex trafficking in this country. Since this discovery, experts in the field have begun to refer to this crime against children as “domestic minor sex trafficking,” or DMST (Clawson & Goldblatt Grace, 2007; Shared Hope International, 2007). In this article, current definitions of and statistics related to DMST are presented. Those groups most at risk for becoming DMST victims are identified, as are some of the prevailing reasons that DMST exists. Gaps in services for this population are identified, along with appropriate and distinct roles for social work in addressing this issue.

LEGAL CONNECTION BETWEEN HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND PROSTITUTION OF MINORS

The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (VTVPA) of 2000 (P.L. 106-386) defined human trafficking as follows:

(a) sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in

which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age; or
(b) the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery. (p. 8)

The VTVPA stated that sex trafficking “means the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act” (p. 8) and that a commercial sex act is “any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person” (p. 7). It is important to note that with these definitions, any minor, including a U.S. citizen, under the age of 18 who is used in a commercial sex act is a trafficking victim (Hughes, 2007). It is critical to understand that this includes the “pimping” or “prostituting” of a child or youth, which, beginning with the VTVPA, became synonymous with sex trafficking of a minor, thereby equating a pimp (who prostitutes minors or adults with force, fraud, or coercion) with a trafficker (Hughes, 2008).

DMST: DEFINITION, PREVALENCE, AND PERSPECTIVE

DMST is modern-day slavery of children, and those most vulnerable to becoming victims in this country are American children. According to Shared Hope

International (2007), founded by former U.S. Congresswoman Linda Smith, which conducted research on this topic during 2008 in 10 U.S. cities, DMST is “the commercial sexual abuse of children through buying, selling, or trading their sexual services” (p. 1). Forms of DMST include prostitution, pornography, stripping, escort services, and other sexual services. In terms of prevalence, most experts suggest there are currently at least 100,000 DMST victims in the United States (Estes & Weiner, 2002; Smith, 2008), with up to 325,000 more at risk for becoming such victims (Estes & Weiner, 2002; Hughes, 2007; U.S. Department of Justice, 2007a); however, others have suggested that due to the hidden nature of the problem, the questionable methodologies of prior studies, and a lack of sufficient attention to the issue, there are no reliable estimates of the extent of the problem (Stransky & Finkelhor, 2008).

Although more accurate approximations of this phenomenon are expected (see the Crimes Against Children Research Center Web site: <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/index.html>), data on the age of entry into commercial sexual exploitation, including prostitution, do exist. On the basis of research from two studies, at least 70 percent of women involved in prostitution were introduced into the commercial sex industry before reaching 18 years of age (Hughes, 2007). The average age at which children are being lured into commercial sexual exploitation is between 11 and 14, although some are as young as five (Smith, 2008; U.S. Department of Justice, 2007b). In a videotaped interview, one former DMST victim (Shared Hope International, 2009) stated,

We're all under 18. We're all the same age. There would be a few girls I knew who were in their 20s or whatever, but they were doing it since they were our age anyways. I did wait till 12, and these girls had been doing it since they were eight or nine and now they are like 23.

Finally, in the first ever available national-level data on human trafficking investigations, 83 percent of the 1,229 investigations were sex trafficking cases (Kyckelhahn, Beck, & Cohen, 2009); of those, 63 percent involved U.S. citizens, and almost one-third (32 percent) involved minors.

The commercial sexual exploitation of children and youths in this country is certainly not a new phenomenon, but it has been suggested that industries such as prostitution have generally been viewed

as “moral or ethical” problems, with little attention paid to the age of those involved until recent years (Halter, 2007). Because of this long-standing perspective that activities such as prostitution are unacceptable per societal norms, one of the greatest challenges in working with DMST victims may be changing the perception of these minors, not only by others, but also by themselves, from “criminals” to “victims” (Clawson & Goldblatt Grace, 2007). Despite this difficulty, the fact remains that currently, U.S. children are being sold for sex not only on the streets, by pimps, but via Craigslist and at truck stops across the country (Smith, 2008).

SUPPLY AND DEMAND OF DMST

One way of understanding why a heinous practice such as DMST exists in the United States is in terms of supply–demand principles. It is important to recognize that the trafficking of thousands of American children for commercial sexual exploitation would not exist if the demand for them were not present. Mark Lagon (2008), former director of the U.S. Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons under President George W. Bush's administration, has suggested that this demand can be understood from the perspective of the *trafficker*, driven by greed and money, or from that of the *consumer*, driven by sexual desires. Lagon (2008) asserted that the trafficker is “motivated by money—a powerful incentive that is, self evidently, the real driver in the economics of sex trafficking” and that anywhere there is “a thriving sex industry exploiters need to generate a supply for the ravenous market to consume fellow human beings as sex commodities” (p. 1). Traffickers, many of whom are part of organized criminal networks, are undoubtedly influenced by profits in an industry in which those are estimated to fall between \$32 billion (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2007) and \$91 billion (Kara, 2009).

A CULTURE OF TOLERANCE

It is a bit more difficult to define just what a thriving sex trade industry looks like, but some of the most recent research on sex trafficking in four countries with major commercial sex markets—Jamaica, the Netherlands, the United States, and Japan—suggests that each of these countries maintains a “culture of tolerance” that supports flourishing sex trafficking markets (Shared Hope International, n.d.-a). Although the markets are distinct in each nation—shaped by factors such as history, language,

and laws—they “all require some level of tolerance within the community in order to exist” (Shared Hope International, n.d.-a, p. 17). Researchers suggest that in the United States, which is shaped by a “culture that glamorizes pimping and prostitution” (Shared Hope International, n.d.-b, p. 2), growing numbers of children and youths are lured into commercial sex trade businesses “to service the demand resulting from the normalization and promotion of commercial sex across America” (Shared Hope International, n.d.-b, p. 2), resulting in what has essentially become a “shopping mall where buyers can choose from a variety of human products of various ages and colors” (Shared Hope International, n.d.-b, p. 1).

This culture of tolerance, fueled by the glamorization of pimping, is embodied in multiple venues of daily life, including clothing, songs, television, video games, and other forms of entertainment. Through a quick online search, one can locate information for throwing a successful “pimp and ho” party or download one of many free ringtones, including “Pimpin All Over the World” and “P.I.M.P.” MTV, a popular television channel among youths and young adults, produces a show titled *Pimp My Ride*, about designing automobiles with cool, new features; a Wii game of the same name is now available for purchase. In *Keep Pimpin'*, a free online game (<http://www.keeppimpin.com/index.php>), as a player you are a pimp and get to “slap your hoes, pimp the streets, kill the competition, and ally with your friends to take the pimp world by storm.” The song “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp” took top honors for Best Original Song at the 78th Academy Awards.

In each of these examples, which only scratch the surface of those that exist, being a “pimp” is equated with being “cool” or “winning” (Shared Hope International, n.d.-a), reflecting how pimps are “treated in popular culture as admirable rebels, as hip and stylish” (Lagon, 2008, p. 1). At the same time—while adopting slogans, phrases, and images from “the world’s oldest profession”—most individuals who engage in such practices fail to acknowledge the degradation, beating, and demoralization that the vast majority of female prostitutes experience at the hands of pimps (see, for example, Farley, 2003; Farley & Barkan, 1998).

DMST VICTIMS

Lagon (2008) maintained that traffickers exploit minors and foreign nationals to fulfill the demands

of commercial sex business customers. Delivering the keynote address at a national conference on the sex trafficking of American youths, Andrew Oosterbaan (2008), chief of the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section of the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice, stated that “there is an endless supply of victims in this country.” Among those most at risk are those who have run away or been “thrown away” from home, those who are homeless or have a history of abuse, and those in the foster care or child protective services systems (Shared Hope International, n.d.-a). Some statistics on these groups are available. Nationally, between 450,000 and 2.8 million children and youths run away or are thrown away from home every year (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002), and significant numbers of them will be commercially sexually exploited (Estes & Weiner, 2002; Hammer et al., 2002). According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2007a), involvement in prostitution is at “epidemic proportions” among youths on the streets, and at least 75 percent of those involved in formal prostitution are controlled by a pimp, which can mean exploitation at “escort and massage services, private dancing, drinking and photographic clubs, major sporting and recreational events, major cultural events, conventions, and tourist destinations” (p. 1).

In addition to those on the streets, America’s youngest also become victims through the Internet. Not only do traffickers advertise children online for sexual purposes through hundreds of Web sites, but they search for victims through social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace (Oosterbaan, 2008). In addition, traffickers publish legitimate-appearing advertisements for employment or other opportunities as a means to lure victims into what in reality are commercial sex businesses. Adolescents who surf the Internet can be tricked into sharing personal information or pictures that put them at an increased risk for becoming DMST victims. Recent research by Shared Hope International (n.d.-d) conducted across 10 cities in the United States found that the Internet was used in all 10 locations as a means for selling children for sexual purposes (Shared Hope International, n.d.-d).

Finally, according to a U.S. Department of Justice report, traffickers and pimps target children and youths at “bus stations, arcades, and malls, focusing on girls who appear to be runaways or without money or job skills” (Albanese, 2007, p. 3). Some girls report being groomed by traffickers while they

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are still living at home and attending school (Smith, 2008). This period of grooming usually involves the pimp assuming the role of the potential victim's boyfriend, including giving her gifts and compliments, all of which serve to gain her initial loyalty and trust. Others have been forced to perform sexual acts in exchange for drugs or money by parents or relatives, a practice dubbed "familial prostitution" (Smith, 2008; U.S. Department of Justice, 2007a). In other words, some youths are becoming DMST victims in places that, and through the actions of people who, are generally considered "safe."

SERVICES FOR DMST SURVIVORS

On rescue or escape from their slavery, human trafficking victims, including DMST victims, need appropriate housing, physical and mental health care, legal services, and other basic necessities such as food and clothing. Although such services are readily available in some communities for victims of trafficking from other countries, it is much more difficult to secure them for individuals from the United States (Hughes, 2007). One of the most obvious necessities, and a struggle encountered by victim service providers across the country, is finding appropriate, safe housing for victims (Rocke, 2008; Smith, Smolenski, & Mattar, 2006), because simply too few protective shelters exist to fully meet the needs of this population (Smith, 2008). According to R. Jones, program specialist with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Trafficking in Persons Program (personal communication, July 3, 2008), the end result is that the "best among worst choices" is often being made when it comes to placement. Young victims are held in juvenile detention centers, returned to the homes from which they fled, or placed in nonsecure facilities, choices that can mean increased risk of a repeat episode of running away, revictimization of the minor, or interference with a law enforcement investigation (R. Jones,

program specialist, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Trafficking in Persons Program, personal communication, July 3, 2008; Shared Hope International, 2006).

It is important to note that the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-457), which the U.S. Congress passed on December 10, 2008, and President Bush signed into law on December 23, 2008, authorized up to \$5 million in 2009, \$7 million in 2010, and \$7 million in 2011 to provide services for U.S. victims of human trafficking. The Obama administration has expressed its commitment to antitrafficking efforts, but it remains to be seen if funding will be made available under the current administration.

The Wilberforce Act also reauthorized the 2005 provisions to support shelters for U.S. minors—provisions that were never funded. One recent study on programs serving DMST victims located only four U.S. facilities that specifically served this population: Girls Educational and Mentoring Services' Transition to Independent Living program in New York City; Standing Against Global Exploitation Safe House in San Francisco; Children of the Night in Van Nuys, California; and Angela's House in a rural community outside of Atlanta (Clawson & Goldblatt Grace, 2007). With a total of 45 beds between these organizations, most DMST survivors live in "residential treatment centers, child protective services-funded group homes and foster care placements, and juvenile corrections facilities" (Clawson & Goldblatt Grace, 2007, p. 3). Clawson and Goldblatt Grace suggested that in many other facilities, DMST victims often go unrecognized, making both training of staff and establishment of additional organizations dedicated to meeting the unique needs of this population priorities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Practice- and Agency-Based Responses

Because youths who have been involved in illegal activities, including those in commercial sex industries, have traditionally been viewed as offenders or delinquents, there are still some who fail to see these individuals as victims. Social workers can be a strong voice of support and advocacy on behalf of this vulnerable population, particularly those working in settings where youths have typically been treated as criminals, such as juvenile detention centers and other law enforcement agencies. Modeling change in simple behaviors, such as language

used of and toward youths who have been involved in prostitution or other commercial sex industries, is recommended. No longer should derogatory and demeaning words such as “prostitute,” “slut,” or “sex worker” be tolerated; rather, language that embodies the social work value of dignity and respect for every individual and calls these young people what they truly are—victims of trafficking or children or youths who have been prostituted—should be used.

Social workers should also suggest the development of screening protocols in agencies where DMST victims are likely to be encountered. The Web site of the Administration for Children and Families’ Campaign to Rescue and Restore Victims of Human Trafficking (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking/>) has toolkits that include screening questions for social service, health care, and law enforcement professionals, items that would likely be appropriate for some agencies to incorporate into intake or assessment forms. Recognizing that many of the minors they encounter might actually be trafficking victims, the Dallas Police Department implemented a system to assess high-risk minors for such a possibility (Shared Hope International, n.d.-c). In 2007, as a result of this innovation, the department determined that 63 percent of the high-risk youths were involved in prostitution (Shared Hope International, n.d.-c). Other agencies, such as child welfare and child advocacy agencies, are urged to consider similar procedures, particularly in light of the revelation that familial prostitution is occurring.

Many social workers may be in prime locations to develop and implement educational awareness campaigns. Many people remain unaware that U.S. youths can become victims of sex trafficking by traffickers who will exploit youths who are vulnerable, available, and naïve. Targeted prevention strategies to inform at-risk populations—including those in runaway shelters, alternative schools, and the juvenile justice system—about the realities of commercial sexual exploitation and strategies for avoiding victimization would be welcomed. Also valuable would be general awareness campaigns about DMST and the tactics used by traffickers to lure victims (including the use of social networking sites); safety guidelines for youths and parents could be disseminated through a variety of venues, including professional organization, schools, and churches.

Finally, some social workers will actually find themselves working with DMST survivors. As Hodge (2008) noted, such practitioners should understand the effects of being trafficked. According to Clawson and Goldblatt Grace (2007), consequences frequently experienced by DMST victims include posttraumatic stress disorder, substance use problems, malnutrition, anxiety, and self-destructive behaviors. Because of these complex issues, some social workers may find it necessary to refer clients who are DMST survivors for additional services. Under such circumstances, social workers should look for therapists who have experience in treating these specific issues and who offer cognitive-behavioral therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy, or eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, because these interventions have been shown to be effective with populations that have experienced trauma (Clawson & Goldblatt Grace, 2007). For clients actually needing residential placement, social workers should look for agencies that are able to provide clients with access not only to mental health services, but to health care, case management services, educational opportunities, community and family reentry assistance, and life and job skills training. Many areas now have established human trafficking coalitions that know the programs and counselors in their areas that can serve this population. The national human trafficking hotline (888-3737-8888) can also assist with information and referral to local service providers.

Advocacy and Policy Possibilities

Understanding the prevalence of the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youths in this country, social workers should dialogue with public policymakers and law enforcement officials at the local, state, and federal levels to develop strategies to help reduce, if not end, the demand in their communities. First offender programs—commonly referred to as “john schools,” in which (generally) men who are arrested for purchasing sex are given the option of paying a fee and attending a class on the inherent harms associated with prostitution or facing prosecution—have been found to be effective at reducing recidivism (Shively et al., 2008). In 2006, Atlanta launched its “Dear John” campaign, comprising billboards and television and radio advertisements aimed to “end the commercial sexual exploitation of children” (City of Atlanta Online, 2009). Mayor Shirley Franklin’s powerful message

can be heard here: http://www.atlantaga.gov/mayor/dearjohn_111006.aspx.

Social workers can also address the normalization of pimping and prostitution in this country. When the sexual exploitation of women and children is turned into games, clothing, or music, social workers must be willing to take a stand—ask businesses to stop selling products that are degrading to women and girls; write letters to the editor informing the public that prostitution and other forms of commercial sex are not victimless crimes; and educate clients, especially youths, about the importance of gender equality and respectful, loving, healthy relationships. Other social workers may choose to work on this issue at the macro level, promoting the adoption of legislation on par with that of Sweden and Norway. Sweden was the first country to outlaw the purchase of sex, making the “john” the criminal rather than the prostitute. In a discussion of the Swedish model, Hodge (2008) stated that a “societal message is communicated that it is inappropriate to buy and sell women and children for men’s sexual purposes” (p. 150).

Finally, there is a clear and present need for increased services for children and youths coming out of commercial sexually exploitive situations, especially for safe, secure housing. Social workers can work with local coalitions on fundraising efforts in communities where this need is identified or serve on the boards of existing facilities. All social workers can certainly contact their legislators to help ensure that shelters authorized in the current VTVPA come to fruition through actual fund allocation. The current system is simply not sufficient to meet the needs of the victims who are being identified now, and it certainly will not be able to support those of a population that grows because of better identification or a decrease in demand.

Research Needs

Opportunities for research on DMST abound. Social workers could conduct community needs assessments to assess the knowledge of social workers, other social service providers, and law enforcement professionals on DMST and their ability to appropriately respond to victims. Assessments could also entail mapping of specific locations where prostitution and other commercial sex businesses are known to operate, with the aim of identifying areas for possible outreach work with potential victims or placement of public awareness advertisements.

Studies with children and youths, both male and female, to determine to the impact of the media and culture on things such as self-image, the role of women, gender equality, and risk behaviors could be beneficial. Clearly, research that examines the effectiveness of programs designed to prevent at-risk youths from becoming DMST victims are needed, beginning with those that assess acquisition of needed knowledge and resources to avoid victimization.

Finally, although data are beginning to emerge documenting the prevalence of DMST in the United States, little research *with* this population has actually been conducted. More exploration is needed to understand the diversity that exists within the population, the methods of reentry into schools and communities that are most effective, and the resilience factors that allowed DMST victims to endure their circumstances. A comparative analysis of the four programs actually providing services to this population would undoubtedly yield valuable information for building future programming.

CONCLUSION

The commercial sex trade business in the United States is alive and well, due in part to a culture of tolerance that exists in this country, leaving behind thousands of DMST victims who have been lured to meet a market demand. Social workers must be educated about DMST and those groups that are most at risk for becoming victims. Social workers can help to address the issue through education, advocacy, and research. **SW**

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