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Human Trafficking and Domestic Violence: Etiology, Intervention, and Overlap with Child Maltreatment

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Connecting the Dots: We Can Utilize the Connections between Trafficking, Family Violence, and Society to Recognize and Prevent Exploitation

The United States Congress, through the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA)¹ and its subsequent reauthorizations, has given law enforcement and prosecutors a formidable sword with which to combat traffickers at both home and abroad, and for this they are to be commended. But child advocates know that there is desperate need for a shield with which to guard children from being exploited, and to protect those who have been rescued. In order to forge this shield, we must understand the forces underlying this epidemic. This issue of the *Journal of Applied Research on Children*, sponsored by the Allstate Foundation, looks beyond the surrounding sensationalism, and explores the individual and cultural factors, including family violence, which provide the fertile ground for this crime to flourish, evaluates the role that providers can play in identifying victims, and examines ways in which trafficking can be prevented from the outset.

Human trafficking is lucrative for the criminals who engage in it and horrific for the victims, many of whom are children. Though trafficking is the ultimate and most appalling form of child exploitation, as Rachel Lloyd, Founder and CEO of Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS), reveals in her commentary, we are learning that the factors that contribute to the trafficking process start early, long before a child is actually bought or sold. If these causes can be recognized and countered, more victims will be rescued and many more potential victims will never be harmed.

One of these factors can be attributed to all of us, for in a very real sense, our consumerist society exploits all children, regardless of age. Parents and caregivers who believe that the increasingly sexual imagery and messages which are directed at children are crossing a line are right to be alarmed. Pornography and society's laissez-faire attitude toward the sexualization of minors have played a major role in the explosive growth of child sex trafficking. In short, we give children the entire burden of adult sexuality to carry—and at ever-earlier ages—but provide them with little or no assistance, education, understanding or tools with which to cope with this burden. Equally devastating are the conflicting messages children are given about sex—popular culture normalizes exploitative relationships with teens, while concurrently reinforcing depictions of prostituted children as being “bad” or deserving of their fate. These forces can make children easy victims and complicate rehabilitation if they are rescued.

On an individual level, other factors come into play. There is no definitive profile of a trafficking victim, but many victims share some similarities both in early experiences which may have made them more vulnerable to exploitation, and with respect to the traumatic aftereffects of being trafficked. Many of the articles in this issue identify these early commonalities, such as substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and neglect. The results of being trafficked are also similar for many victims, whose health, both mental and physical, have been impacted

¹ See 22 U.S.C. § 7101 *et seq.*

and who may have formed trauma bonds with his or her exploiter, or who feel rejected due to feelings of shame.

These commonalities do more than provide clues as to which groups are more subject to exploitation. Healthcare providers are front-line personnel who are likely to come in contact with victims at some point during their enslavement, and knowledge of these commonalities can lead to children being rescued. For example, the article “Using a Clinic-based Screening Tool for Primary Care Providers to Identify Commercial Sexually Exploited Children” discusses one such screening tool that may prove helpful to all healthcare service providers within clinical settings in identifying trafficking victims so that an intervention can be made. Similarly, another article explores how better training for law enforcement can help to extricate children early. By knowing and recognizing the factors that correlate with trafficking, such as substance abuse, educated officers may be able to identify victims among those who are arrested for seemingly unrelated crimes.

Last, we must also give attention to those who have been rescued from their traffickers. These children have undergone unique trauma and require special services. One study argues for developing a multi-sector collaboration that has the tools to help trafficked minors, such as including member organizations in primary care with personnel who can identify sex-trafficked minors when they reach out, as well as a system that has improved training for officers in the juvenile justice system to assist the trafficked minor. Another study advocates for creating the special position of “clearly identified care coordinator” in smaller urban areas, who can navigate across systems of juvenile justice and child welfare, including housing, education, and healthcare. This person would be in charge of facilitating collaboration and communication among service providers, while protecting client privacy and autonomy.

Traffickers use an ever-changing arsenal of techniques to locate and recruit children into the web of sexual exploitation. This issue of the *Journal of Applied Research on Children* demonstrates that we can be similarly diverse in devising methods to protect our children.

A great many thanks to those that contributed to the publishing of this special issue. Matt Winters and his team at Allstate, deserve special recognition for their tireless devotion to ending to family violence and their ability to look ahead and see the connection between family violence and trafficking in America. Thanks to the Allstate Foundation, our readers will have a greater understanding of the factors that exacerbate the likelihood of being trafficked, which is crucial to prevention, and of the importance of education to both providers and children. We also want to thank our issue editors for bringing an indefatigable effort to the publication of the issue. A very big thank-you is also due to my co-executive editor, Dr. Angelo Giardino, who with this issue, steps down as editor. I want to express my abiding gratitude to my very good friend for his help in founding this journal and for being such a significant force in making it a success. I will miss you, Ange!

Finally, we sincerely hope that this issue inspires readers to take action and join anti-trafficking efforts, as children's lives are truly at risk.