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Buying Sex On-Line from Girls: NGO Representatives, Law Enforcement Officials, and Public Officials Speak out About Human Trafficking – A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Federal agencies report the high level of sex trafficking of minors in the United States. This trafficking often occurs on-line with the Internet. Pimps commonly advertise children for sexual exploitation online, and they search social networking sites for young victims. Thus, the high rate of trafficking minors and the increased use of technology have led to a need to better understand purchasing young girls for sex on-line. This qualitative study focused on learning from NGO representatives, law enforcement officials, and public officials their experiences about how men buy girls on-line for sex, and the words that the men use in the transactions. Moreover, it explored beliefs about human trafficking, the anti-trafficking practices, the criminal treatment of young victims, the safe places for girls to stay, and the sex trafficking programs available for these young women. To learn about these issues, we conducted thirty-eight interviewees with participants in four locations in the United States. Six different themes emerged: (1) familiarity of the interviewees with sex trafficking and its research; (2) law enforcement anti-trafficking practices; (3) the buying side of sex trafficking; (4) the criminal treatment of victims; (5) lack of safe places for girls to stay; and (6) the prevention, intervention, and assessment of sex trafficking programs. These results have important implications for human trafficking researchers, policymakers, law enforcement officials, and for those who provide services for the young girls.

Keywords: Sex trafficking , NGOs , Law enforcement officials, Public officials, Victims

When teenager Melissa ran away from home, she was quickly found by a man who promised her help, but was actually a pimp who intended to sexually exploit her. He used psychological manipulation and coercion to hold her in prostitution, and advertised her using online sites. Refusal to do what he said was met by beatings and threats. Despite her fear of being found and killed if she ran, Melissa 1 day managed to escape from a hotel room where he was keeping her. A patron at another hotel nearby helped her reach the police, who arrested her trafficker.

--From Trafficking in Person Report, (U. S. Department of State, 2014).

The case of Melissa tells us about the problem: a young girl, sexually exploited, psychologically coerced, and found by a man who promised her help. The U.S. Bureau of Justice has reported that one-third of all sex trafficking cases involve minors [4]. In addition, the Internet, social media, digital platforms, and mobile technology make communication so easy that it has altered the way society lives, connects, receives information, and makes decisions. Technology has facilitated the ease and efficiency with which people buy and sell goods, often affecting the way that marginalized and vulnerable people—including children and minors—are bought and sold through trafficking. From Shared Hope International we also know that in nine out of ten cities, the Internet was used to facilitate domestic minor sex trafficking [9]. It is not uncommon for traffickers, to carry video cameras, tablets, and cellular phones, increasing their ability to exploit women and children more than ever before [8]. With such efficiency and effectiveness, the use of technology for exploitative purposes has also increased, due in part to factors such as the expansion of the Internet and the ability of users to remain anonymous [11]. Buyers can now “shop” online with ease and have a safe level of anonymity that was not available before [6]. Experts in the field also report that pimps commonly advertise children for sexual exploitation online, and search social networking sites for victims [1]. Thus, the high rate of trafficking minors and the increased use of technology have led to a need to better understand purchasing young girls for sex on-line.

The limited information we have about this problem, however, is found in general studies and reports, such as in national surveys [9], on television programs [10], among international study groups [3], in conference proceedings [6] and among advocacy groups [1]. Missing in these reports is often the first-person experiences of views from those familiar with the problem of men buying sex online: NGO representatives, law enforcement officials, and public office holders. Thus, the purpose of this study is to provide an in-depth look at the issue of men purchasing young girls for sex through the Internet and to report views held by NGO representatives, law enforcement officials, and public officers. The themes that emerge from interviews should inform those studying human trafficking of minors, policy makers who can enact just and fair laws for the young women, law enforcement officers who often arrest these young women, and programs and public assistance agencies that can provide safe places and help for these girls.

The Current Study

Given the problem of human trafficking minors in the United States, Microsoft Corporation and its Digital Crimes Unit, called for proposals on the Role of the Internet when Men Buy Girls. The University of Nebraska Lincoln (UNL) was one of five academic institutions to receive one of these prestigious grants. UNL’s proposal was about words men use online to purchase young girls and women for sex. The purpose of this grant was to find out these words to help Microsoft use this information to protect at-risk girls and also to help prevent trafficking. Therefore, the specific goal of this study was to answer two research questions: how do men buy girls for sex, and what words do men use for the sex transaction? Although these questions were the primary focus of our study, we began our interviews (see “Appendix 1: Interview Protocol Questions”) by asking NGO representatives, police officers, and public office general orienting questions: about their familiarity with human trafficking, the practice used by law enforcement officers with the minor girls, how the girls were treated, and the help for these minors through prevention, interventions and programs.

Method

Research Design and the Questions

The research design for this project was qualitative research in order to hear the voices of interviewees, to record detailed quotes to illustrate the words men used, and to provide a detailed description of the girls and services available to them. Within qualitative research we chose a phenomenological approach, an approach that would focus on significant statements made by interviewees, themes that aggregated the statements, and detailed descriptions [5]. Within this approach the research questions address what the NGO representatives, police officers, and public officials had experienced, and the context or setting in which they had experienced it.

Sampling and Sample Size

In a phenomenological study, the interviewees must be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon being explored by the investigator and can articulate their lived experiences [2]. This required that researchers often gain permission to study the site/individual in a way that will enable fair and beneficial data collection. Therefore, an approval from Institutional Review Board (IRB) and individuals at the corresponding sites was obtained first. In the current study, an IRB approval form was obtained from the university IRB (IRB Approval#: 20130313175 EX) and consent forms were obtained from the participants respectively.

Purposeful criterion sampling was used in this study to get a variety of information from NGOs, law enforcement officials, and public officials regarding the human trafficking issues [7]. A sample of 40 people participated in this qualitative study with 38 interviews (four of the participants were interviewed together in two different interviews) and the interviews were audio-recorded. Interviewees were predominately NGO representatives ($n = 30$), public health or government officials ($n = 6$), and law enforcement officials ($n = 4$). All interviewees from public health or government were men, while all interviewees from NGOs and law enforcement organizations were both men and women. Some of the NGOs were former victims of trafficking (and now survivors) while others were involved in combating trafficking. Participants were recruited using the following inclusion criteria: (1) familiarity with human trafficking issues, directly or indirectly working with anti-trafficking practices and human trafficking in NGOs, law enforcement, or public office; (2) 18 years of age or older; (3) able to complete a 1-hour long audio taped semi-structured, open-ended interview with permission given through a signed consent form. Thirty six interviews were completed face-to-face and two were conducted by telephone.

Data Collection

We conducted thirty-six face-to-face and telephone, in-depth semi-structured interviews in this study. Ten 60-min interviews guided by the interview protocol for law enforcement were conducted to ten participants who are currently serving as public health, government or law enforcement officials. Twenty-eight interviews guided by the interview protocol for organizations were conducted to 30 participants who are currently working in different NGOs. All 38 interviews were conducted at four different locations in multiple sites suggested by the participants. These four locations were Kansas City (MO), Lincoln and Omaha (NE), Orange County (CA), and Washington D.C. Protocols were semi-structured to allow researchers to discover different ideas and new themes building on our predetermined questions.

All interviews were recorded using a voice memoing program. The names and identifications were masked to protect the anonymity of participants. Backup copies of the recordings were developed and kept in the investigator's computer. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by four different qualified transcribers. Transcribed data were imported into a qualitative data analysis program, MAXQDA 11.0.0 [12] for analysis. Researchers ensured anonymity by changing the names of the participants and deleting any information to de-identify participants in the final research report.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell [2], there are some core steps in analyzing qualitative data, which are coding the data by reducing the data into meaningful segments and labeling the segments, combining the codes into broader categories or themes, and displaying and making comparisons in the data graphs, tables, and charts. Consistent with the phenomenological approach from Moustakas [5], we developed significant statements based on quotes, identified codes in the data, and then aggregated the codes into themes. Five hundred and twenty-two expressions provided evidence of significant statements. Twenty-three codes represented an aggregate of these statements, and we derived six themes by further collapsing the codes into broad areas to report in our results. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the themes, the codes, and the quotes to provide a detailed perspective on the database. We further validated and sought reliability the accuracy of our thematic analysis by having all three authors in this study examine and discuss the codes and the themes to seek inter-rater agreement on the appropriate codes and themes.

Results

The six themes begin by assessing the participants' understanding of the human trafficking issue and the delving more deeply into the specific issue of men buying sex on-line from girls. These themes were: (1) familiarity with and research in human trafficking; (2) law enforcement anti-trafficking practices; (3) the buying side of human trafficking; (4) victims treated as criminals; (5) safe places for girls to stay; and (6) prevention, intervention, and assessment for human trafficking.

Familiarity with and Research in Human Trafficking

When participants were asked how familiar they were with human trafficking in the US, 38 out of 40 participants said that they were pretty familiar with it. One participant said she was extremely familiar with human trafficking as she had "been a victim" herself - "as young child I was exploited." Another participant described her familiarity with human trafficking as "my passion is working with young survivors," this participant then added, "I volunteered at an organization for 3 years." Other participants admitted that they were not quite familiar with human trafficking. One participant noted, "I just have a basic knowledge of human trafficking in the United States." Another described herself as just "heightened awareness in the last year."

With regard to the participants' knowledge of research about human trafficking only 10 out 40 participants said they had conducted research that was related to human trafficking issues. One participant perceived research in human trafficking as "I've read some books." Another noted, "personally I've taken a lot of time to take a look at other people's research." A different participant described herself as having "studied specifically pornographies linked with trafficking" and "investigated and researched many programs

Table 1 Examples of quotes and codes

Quotes	Codes
I think I'm pretty familiar, I have been uh... involved with sex industry through escorting and prostitution and I have also studied human trafficking	Familiarity with sex industry is from both through prostitution and studying
I have studied specifically like pornographies linked with trafficking and like rape basically I also did like a media communication class in college	Research experience is from field and college
I did a march with an anti-trafficking organization, where a lot of women were being sold	Involvement in anti-trafficking practice
I mean in... that uh... there are no enforcement of prostitution laws, human trafficking laws, escorting laws	There is no related law enforcement to deal with human trafficking
We're also working with a lot of domestic violence shelters	Working with other organizations to help trafficked children
I try to help the girls individually um.. by giving them...by help providing them at least with resources to get the basic needs met	Support anti-trafficking practice by helping the girls individually
There are federal laws against sex trafficking. The issue is that you have to have a US attorney office. In...state, the enforcement laws are very weak	There are federal laws against trafficking, but the state laws are very weak
A license from the Health Department making sure that everything is secured and safe and you know you have a license to run a group home	A license should be required to run a group home to host run-away children
We don't have any licensed escort services in our town	License Should be required to escort services
We're gonna continue to support those that are trying to enhance the laws that is going to bring some financial resources to the victims in this situation	Support law enforcement by bringing some financial resources to the victims
So they're free to operate with very very little risk of getting caught and it's something we could do if we wanted to	Awareness to anti-trafficking and what action we may take
I would say really the average age that we are seeing is between 12 and 14	Between 12 and 14 is the most attractive age to buyers
You can, just by the language, you can tell the age, more or less	You can tell whether a girl is young or not
Without demand there would be no supply	If there is no buyers, there would be no sex trafficking
So "new in town" is a big key. And that's often the key for finding trafficking victims	Words used by buyers and pimps to find young girls for sex
There have been plenty that have come through the dating services	The places that buyers can meet/find girls for sex
The victims don't really want to be discovered because they can be criminally prosecuted	The trafficked girls are treated as criminals
Her mother is absent from the home, the traditional fatherless child, they are living in grinding poverty and limiting circumstances	The profile of a typical trafficked girl
Whole other piece of kids are getting hurt at home and they have nowhere safe to go	The children have no places to go

throughout the United States.” One participant admitted that this interview was the first time she was involved in a study in human trafficking, and said, “I haven’t conducted any research myself.” As was mentioned by another participant, “as a service provider, I don’t think we’re research based.”

The Anti-Trafficking Practices of Law Enforcement Officials

In terms of state and federal practices, a participant mentioned that the federal government has a set of human trafficking taskforces to look for sex trafficking, but they “have to stay within their jurisdiction and not step on the toes of state jurisdiction.” A different participant noted, “the federal authorities have criminal charges, but the states have the ability to have state charges.” Therefore, there are two different levels to charge a criminal of human trafficking. In the discussion of possessing and distribution of sex, one participant noted, “the federal standards are a little bit higher” in comparison to state standards.

The participants also discussed their collaboration with other organizations around the human trafficking issue. One participant noted, “we have an outstanding collaborative relationship with the FBI. For example, if a criminal can be prosecuted federally rather than statewide, they would reach out to FBI partner to investigate the case jointly.” Another

Table 2 Six themes with corresponding codes

Theme	Codes
Familiarity and research in human trafficking	Familiarity with human trafficking Research in human trafficking
Law enforcement anti-trafficking practices	Human trafficking taskforce Work with other organizations Support to anti-trafficking practice Law enforcement in human trafficking License requirement for shelters Regulatory laws for escorting Support to law enforcement Awareness and action
The buying side of human trafficking	Buyers know what they are looking for Most attractive age to buyers How to identify a young girl Words buyers use for sex Where do they find young girls for sex
Victims treated as criminals	The profile of a victim The victim side Children did not have rights
Safe places for girls to stay	Girls need a safe place to stay Treat the girls as children
Preventions, interventions, and assessment for human trafficking programs	Family counseling Prevention and treatment Trafficking assessment

participant mentioned that they are working with a lot of domestic violence shelters. For example, if somebody from shelter needs some resources, they would provide their resources for these people. A different participant noted, "we are building a relationship with the police" to help young girls.

Supportive services exist for trafficked victims. One participant mentioned that they participated in different clubs that support "events that combat human trafficking." For example, they went to the meetings of these clubs and helped hand out fliers to combat human trafficking. A different participant detailed how they offered services such as supportive counseling, safe housing, food, and clothing for those trafficked young women to let these women detach from their traffickers. Another participant described how she did ground work in the trafficking rings in the motels to help trafficked women. Other participants mentioned their support by doing some social media and marketing to help educate the public in regard to human trafficking.

Different participants described the level of federal and state law enforcement differently. One participant admitted that there were federal laws against sex trafficking, but "you have to have a US attorney's office" that is willing to stand up and prosecute those (human trafficking) cases. Another participant also considered that "the federal and local law enforcement should work together." A different participant noted, "the enforcement laws are very weak" in some states. One participant considered the buyers and pimps should be prosecuted, if possible, "I'd try to strengthen the laws and just smash the people that are doing it (human trafficking)."

Law enforcement officers also talked about the licensing practices. Because it is very complicated and strict to have a license to run a program or facility to house children age under 18, many group homes have no licenses. Many people and organizations would like to help provide minors in need with shelters. However, laws can only tell them what they can not do, and do not provide any information of what they can do to get a license that can allow them to run a shelter. A participant suggested that any programs or persons who work with minors should have a license. A different participant suggested a license from the Health Department should be required to make sure "everything is secured and safe." One participant added, "if it's licensed, it means it's legit."

As for regulating escort services, one participant stated that "regulatory laws for escorting" are needed. A different participant pointed out that regulations for massage parlors are also needed. With regard to buyers, one individual thought it would be excellent if there are good john schools or good schools for rehabilitating men who are purchasing girls.

Most participants in our study showed their support for law enforcement in human trafficking. One participant stated that they coordinated with the judicial groups to support juveniles and their cases. In addition, this person considered the trafficked girls were not prostitutes, but that they were being prostituted as victims of human trafficking.

In order to educate law enforcement officials and public officials, one interviewee mentioned that they provided human trafficking training and education to increase people's awareness to human trafficking issues. A different participant said when they contacted some of the domestic violence victims they found they were "victims of human trafficking as well." Action on educating people on human trafficking needs to be taken. In some states, buyers are held accountable on a misdemeanor/walk-away level instead of on a felony level. An interviewee suggested, if consistent actions and laws can be applied to the buyers, "it makes a hell of a lot of difference."

The Buying Side of Sex Trafficking

According to participants, they thought the demand side of trafficking is high, and that is what keeps the business thriving. A individual described that the real “demand for sex buying is high,” and “supply is growing too”, because “they (buyers) want more.” Meanwhile, the introduction of the Internet and the anonymous nature of buying and making arrangements for sexual liaisons have “taken some of the social stigma out of it on the part of the perpetrators.” One participant considered that the driving force behind the demand are pimps themselves because they put “our young girls” in jeopardy.

Buyers often look on the Internet and in the neighborhoods. In regard to buyers who are buying sex, one participant said that these buyers knew what they were looking for and where they were going to get these girls. For example, these buyers went to particular Websites such as myredbook, backpage, Craigslist, and USA Sex Guide, to look for girls. A participant added that sometimes these buyers like to drive around the neighborhoods where sex buying is happening. Generally, participants thought the age of the girls “gets lower and lower and lower” because the buyers were bored with the adults. A different interviewee noted, “age 11 is sort of ideal” to buyers because the girls are “less likely to have a good support system” and “less likely to get pregnant.” According to a different participant, young girls are young enough to be controlled mentally. One additional reason that buyers like young girls is because they “want them clean,” “not used up,” and “they (girls) don’t carry STDs.”

The most attractive ages of the girls to buyers are around 12–14 as the girls are “very vulnerable at that point in time.” One participant mentioned that she had worked with girls “as young as 10.” However, some buyers just “want an 18-year-old that looks young” because these buyers would “rather not get charged with a crime against a child.” How do the buyers identify a young girl? Their approaches vary. According to an interviewee, “for a girl around 16 with a lot of make up and who put high heels on and are fully developed, it is difficult to tell”, but for an “11- year-old who you can definitely tell she is 11.” Another individual considered that the vocabulary used by the girls can tell their age and said “language is a key piece.” However, she did not mention what specific words younger girls used in their daily languages.

Words the buyers used for sex buying can vary. According to participants, many different words are used for sex buying. For example, words such as “addict,” “college girl,” “flowers,” “fresh,” “girlfriend,” “ho,” “lolita,” “hot lizard,” “new,” “new here,” “new in town,” “roses,” “slut,” “student,” “young meat,” are terms used for younger girls. One participant said her pimp had called her and other younger girls as “fillies” and “bunnies”, and called the older ones as “rabbits.” With regard to the sex transaction, “French” was used referring to oral sex, “Greek” anal, “hit a lick” means the girls have sold themselves for a profit, a “strawberry” or “raspberry” referred to a girl who has been on the streets for too long, “cap and gown” actually meant full sex. The words for advertising sex were “adult” “entertainment” “escort”, “parties”, and “sex”.

For most buyers, there are a number of different Websites for them to find girls. One participant noted, “buyers have a clearinghouse for who they agree to meet.” A different interviewee mentioned that “myredbook” and “John boards” were where the buyers could ask for a referral for a girl. Other online media and organizations such as Craigslist, backpage, USA Sex Guide, and some dating services were just “a cover for prostitution.” Some pimps used Twitter or Facebook to lure young girls or use other women in their organizations to lure young girls into sex trafficking. One partici-

pant said he was shocked at “how many popped up all over” in “massage parlors” and “escort services.” A different participant mentioned that the “college campus” was a hot bed for trafficking.

The Criminal Treatment of Victims

Creating a profile of trafficked girls is important because they often “don’t really want to be discovered.” As stated by different participants, a typical profile of a trafficked girl is as follows: a traditional fatherless child, or a girl with limited father contact, or a girl who has been consistently exploited by males in her family. The girl’s mother is either involved in some sort of criminal activity such as drug use or absent from home, the girl is being raised by an aunt or the girl has a grandmother who is caring for multiple children and trying to hold down a job. As a result, there is very little opportunity for adult supervision, and very few positive role models from the male side for this girl. Meanwhile, the girl is living in poverty and limited circumstances, living in an abusive or neglectful family situation, or has a history of sexual abuse or violence at a young age. There are also many girls at risk from the “broken” foster care system who are vulnerable to being trafficked. A participant said described a common pattern of being trafficked: an experienced pimp approaches a vulnerable and unsupervised girl when she is out and about. This pimp acts as a caring male at first, and takes her out for a dinner, buys her clothes, and has sex with her as her boyfriend. Eventually, this girl is brainwashed and ends up being trafficked.

From the victims’ side of human trafficking, participants addressed that many trafficked girls are labeled as prostitutes instead of victims when they get caught. From the very beginning, many runaway or missing kids were just helped by sending them back to their homes. No one asked why these kids ran away, and what happened to them (many of them had already dabbled in sex trafficking when they were sent back). One participant said law enforcement training in sensitivity to the victims has not been fully addressed. Many victims who were sex trafficked ended up having charges on their records for the rest of their lives. These experiences negatively impacted them even though these trafficked women were victims all along and had no choices. Some brainwashed minors, a participant said, when they get caught, might feel that “I am here by my own choice,” “I sell myself for a certain amount of money.” They were so brainwashed that they had never thought that they were being exploited. This participant suggested that we not label trafficked girls (especially minors) as prostitutes because they can be so traumatized and so brainwashed.” Most trafficked girls want to be addressed as ‘prostituted’ girls and not prostitutes.

Because many trafficked girls are underage, they do not have any rights. A participant said that she had seen girls go before the judge for “prostitution and get threatened with jail time or get jail time.” Buyers or pimps, however, “were allowed to remain anonymous” and “there was limited prosecution.” Another participant noted, “minors are getting arrested, and the guys who were purchasing them got let off.” A different interviewee also noted, “they (trafficked girls) have no choice,” and “end up going to jail.” Because youth as young as 14 can be charged for a crime as an adult in some jurisdictions, a participant further noted, “a teenage girl who’s bought and sold for sex could be conceivably prosecuted.” This individual added, “that means that her record is now not going to be sealed.” One participant urged to negotiate protection for the girls who cooperate with law enforcement. Many of them were beaten, miscarried, or stabbed to death by pimps because of snitching or suspected snitching.

Safe Places for Girls to Stay

The girls do need a safe place to stay. Many participants felt the hardest thing about trafficked minors is how to find a safe place to house them. One interviewee noted, “there is no service available” for trafficked, homeless, or abandoned teens. A different individual said, “we essentially just leave them (minors) at the detention centers,” in shelters, or they “are taken to Juvenile Hall” because there is no other place to put them. However, “the shelter is not appropriate” and “not really safe.” As noted by one individual, “those shelters are magnets for traffickers.” Even though there are some people trying to accommodate these teens with their own houses, it is far less than enough.

A need exists also to protect the young girls. One participant advocated, “we raise children, it’s more than human trafficking, it is more than prostitution, it is more than their victimization when they are on the streets.” Another individual added, we should “treat them as children.” “To many of these girls, prostitution was a lot better situation than being at home.” A different interviewee noted, “just treat them like children,” and provide them “a safe environment and structure,” “a lot of kids will become successful.”

Prevention, Intervention, and Human Trafficking Assessment

Family counseling services are available to help these young girls. One participant mentioned that they provide family and individual counseling sessions to those families or individuals who are in need. Another participant noted, “we are pretty successful at what we do (family counseling),” as about 70 % of families continue counseling to “get the kids off the streets.”

With regard to human trafficking recovery treatment, one interviewee considered that they have “a very well regarded and very well researched” program. Very often, arrested girls will be given the opportunity to participate in some sorts of programs “in lieu of jail time.” Several interviewees mentioned the ‘My Life My Choice’ curriculum to younger girls. One participant noted, “we provide a 10-week prevention model program ‘My Life My Choice’ to girls who are not yet involved in commercial sexual trafficking but could be vulnerable to being recruited.” According to this participant, ‘My Life My Choice’ could help young girls to actually recognize the difference between a healthy sexual relationship with an equal partner and being exploited by the partner. This participant further mentioned that they have two additional trauma-focused curricula labeled as ‘Recovery Thinking’ and ‘Recovery Thinking for Survivors’ that are provided to younger children who had experienced trauma. Meanwhile, they invited survivors to help those younger children. A different individual noted, “I conduct preventive education programs in youth detention facilities and youth shelters” as many of the young people in these facilities are or have been trafficked or “are considered at high risk of being trafficked.”

Assessment programs are available for these minors. One participant said they do a three-tier assessment for those who have been victims of trafficking. The first tier is used to assess the degree of their exploitation. The second smaller tier with a 10-question questionnaire is to assess their degree of human trafficking. When a certain number of red flags were raised, an intensive human trafficking assessment will then be used. This participant then added, “we determine what level (of intervention) they need” based on the assessment.

Discussion

The two key questions explored in this funded-research project were (a) how do men buy girls for sex? (b) what are the words that the men use on-line for sex transactions? In ad-

dition, four other questions were also explored: (c) how familiar were participants with human trafficking issues? (d) were there any anti-trafficking practices by law enforcement? (e) how were trafficking victims treated? (f) were there any prevention, intervention, and assessment for human trafficking assessment? In this study, the NGO representatives, the law enforcement officials, and the public officials were extensively interviewed to explore their views and to hear their comments on sex trafficking issues based on their direct or indirect contact with younger trafficked girls, and their unique experiences related to the phenomenon of human trafficking. In the process of seeking answers to the proposed questions, six findings emerged that frame the human trafficking issue in the U.S.

First, we found that most NGOs, law enforcement officials, and public officials in this study were familiar with the human trafficking issue, although a few admitted that they just had basic understanding of it. To those who were familiar with human trafficking, their familiarity was either from their voluntary experiences or their exploited or trafficked experiences. Those who had previous voluntary experiences had passion to work with young survivors, while those who had experienced human trafficking themselves were more willing to share their experiences and more willing to help trafficked girls. With regard to research on human trafficking, we found that most NGO representatives, law enforcement officials, and public officials perceived research on trafficking through reading non-academic books, news reports, or taking classes related to human trafficking. Meanwhile, we found that most of them did not consider themselves as researchers, but workers and officials to serve others.

Second, we found that most interviewees were very supportive and showed their extensive concerns for human trafficking laws. Although the federal government has relevant strict laws to go against sex trafficking, the state enforcement laws were very weak. In order to prosecute human trafficking cases, the federal and local law enforcement should work together. Specifically, laws for the escorting industry, massage parlors, and any programs with the involvement of minors should be regulated. With regard to buyers or johns, the running of john schools for men who are purchasing girls can be one solution. Most participants felt that trafficked girls should be treated as victims, while pimps and buyers/johns should be prosecuted.

Third, demand and supply chain decides the existence or extinction of sex trafficking. As there is a high demand in sex trafficking, the supply for sex buying is growing as well. Most buyers used Internet to find girls for sex. There were some special Websites (in addition, there are some commercial Websites available) restricted to buyers and pimps. There were also some specific words used by pimps and buyers to refer to younger girls and sex buying. These words can vary. Age of the girls varied from 12 to 14 years because those ages were most attractive to buyers and pimps. The girls at these ages can be mentally controlled, were cleaner, more vulnerable, and less likely to get pregnant. However, some buyers preferred the girls over 18 (but look young) because they did not want to get charged with a misdemeanor or felony. Different laws should be proposed and legal actions should be taken to curb the demand side of sex trafficking. If there is no demand for sex trafficking, or the cost of being caught and prosecuted are extremely high for the supply for sex buying, the demand and supply chain would be gone.

Fourth, we found that 90 percent of the NGO representatives, law enforcement officials, and public officials hold the opinion that trafficked girls are unfairly and incorrectly treated and prosecuted. Trafficked girls should be protected as victims. From participants' descriptions, we found the common pattern for a trafficked girl is an individual who grew up in a fatherless, unsupervised, or neglectful environment; had the experiences of being

sexually abused or sexually exploited; and had no choices of her own when she was young. One possible way to help trafficked girls is to investigate the stories behind them instead of prosecuting them when they are caught. Many NGO representatives, law enforcement officials, and public officials considered that the buyers and pimps should be prosecuted as the real criminals for selling and purchasing sex.

Fifth, even though there are different shelters and facilities available for runaways, homeless, or abandoned teens, what these trafficked teens need was a safe home or environment. This place would be where no pimps would approach them, and no danger is around. In the eyes of our participants, the trafficked girls were just children, not criminals, and not prostitutes. Young girls who were in danger of being trafficked should be protected properly, and a caring home can provide a safe place instead of being sent home.

Finally, we found that there are different preventive and treatment programs or curricula such as 'My Life My Choice,' 'Recovery Thinking,' and 'Recovery Thinking for Survivors' available to help trafficked girls with different degrees of risks or traumas. There were also different assessments such as the three-tier assessment used by researchers and practitioners to assess human trafficked people. Once the trafficked people were identified, they can then receive different treatments before they return to their homes or are released.

In sum, there are several important messages in our study. First, trafficked girls are not criminals but victims. Pimps and buyers should be prosecuted as criminals. Second, trafficked girls are vulnerable and they need a safe, caring place to stay. Third, federal and state government should work together to prosecute human traffickers (pimps) and buyers (johns). Fourth, as most human traffickers and buyers frequently use the Internet to find younger girls for sex, we can follow their tracks through the words they use, and the practices they engage in. These understandings can aid law enforcement and computer companies in their fight against human trafficking. Last but not least, different policies should be made to help young girls away from being trafficked, to prosecute both pimps and johns, to stop the supply and demand chain of sex buying.

Limitations and Future Research

As with all research, there are several limitations to the current study. First, current data were collected mostly in four different locations (Nebraska, Kansas, Washington D.C., and California) with NGO representatives, law enforcement officials, and public officials as participants. Future work should be conducted with different groups of participants in different locations in the United States. Second, there were important confounds between ethnicity, majority/minority status, and gender of individuals. In this study, however, no data regarding participants' ethnic background were collected. Research with people of different backgrounds is suggested in the future study. As some of the participants mentioned different causes that contribute to sex buying from girls behind the scene, the investigation can be focused on such causes for buying young girls. Third, we realize that reporting the detailed views from participants can run the risk of offering strategies for men to solicit sex from young girls on the Internet. However, for those men who solicit sex, these strategies are in all likelihood already known. Further, we have shared our account and our intent to publish the results from this study. In this project, our unique contribution has been to provide an in-depth look at the problem, to offer the voices of individuals close to the on-line trafficking business for young girls, and to report themes that emerged from these conversations. Hopefully, this discussion will open the door for future studies and be of value to researchers, policymakers, the law enforcement agencies, and for shelters and safe environments to protect the young girls.

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Appendix 1: Interview Protocol Questions

Questions for Law Enforcement

1. What is the intended effect of regulatory laws and regulations of escort industries and similar businesses?
2. What other businesses and industries are closely associated with escort services?
3. Who are the primary business owners and operators of escort services?
4. What powers of regulation and punishment do local authorities have over escort services that are different from typical licensing/zoning bodies?
5. What other laws and measures, besides regulation of legal cover operations, have been discussed or researched as possible ways to curb sex trafficking?
6. Are there any laws or policies on the books that investigate possible trafficking and sex industries when prostitutes are arrested or caught by local law enforcement?
7. Are there any federal laws or regulations that affect a state's ability to combat human sex trafficking and the front businesses that promote prostitution?
8. Do you know of words that are used by johns when they are looking to purchase sex with girls on the Internet? What are some trigger words that may signal a girl is underage?
9. What important questions or issues did I miss that are useful/valuable in understanding human trafficking issues?

Questions for Organizations

1. What is your role?
2. How familiar are you with human sex trafficking in the US?
3. Tell me about your research involved with human trafficking.
4. How have you tried to combat human sex trafficking?
5. How familiar are you with the enforcement laws and how should they be changed?
6. Are you aware of some other sources that could help us look into the demand side of trafficking?
7. Do you have any information about the words that are used by Johns when they look for girls?
8. What words have you seen to describe a girl aged 18–21?
9. What are some trigger words that may signal a girl is underage?
10. What age do you think is most attractive to the typical john and why?
11. What important questions or issues did I miss that are useful/valuable in understanding human trafficking issues?

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