Policing Internet Sex Trafficking

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ABSTRACT

Few studies have examined Internet sex trafficking through the lens of law enforcement working these cases. The purpose of this research is to explore the dynamic nature of policing sex trafficking in the online environment. The qualitative data was drawn from interviews with police investigators and detectives who work sex trafficking cases in two urban cities in Texas. The results suggest that the nature of sex trafficking has significantly evolved since the advent of social media, including the strategies for recruitment of workers and clients, making enforcement easier with some aspects and much more difficult with others. Additionally, law enforcement interviewed believe domestic sex trafficking is a much greater issue in their metropolitan area than international sex trafficking.

Introduction

Human trafficking is one of the fastest growing crimes worldwide, leading the United Nations (2014) to pass a resolution in 2014 on its enforcement and some to call it a "global epidemic" (Morris, 2019). While human trafficking includes forced labor, slavery, and other exploitive activities, one of the largest segments of trafficking is sex trafficking, generating approximately $99 billion of the $150 billion annually of all human trafficking (Children's Rights, n.d.; International Labour Organization, 2014). According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, each pimp or trafficker can make $150,000-$200,000 per girl, with an estimated four to six girls aged twelve to fourteen years being exploited (NPR, 2010). In the United States, sex trafficking constituted 71 percent of reported human trafficking incidents in 2017 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). In 2018, the U.S. Department of Justice prosecuted 230 human trafficking cases, with 213 of those prosecutions involved sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2019). Kara (2009) equivocates sex trafficking to modern-day slavery with three steps in common: acquisition, movement, and exploitation.

In 2019, the prevalence of sex trafficking made headline news when high-profile billionaire hedge fund manager, Jeffrey Epstein, was arrested and charged with running an international sex trafficking ring. Epstein's arrest was especially alarming to those unfamiliar with the complexities and pervasiveness of the crime and perceive perpetrators as sleazy, low-level pimps. Days later, popular R&B singer R. Kelly was arrested and charged with thirteen counts of federal sex trafficking. These high-profile arrests point to increased law enforcement attention and activity toward sex trafficking.

Policing of sex trafficking has gained momentum in the past two decades. In 2002, President Bill Clinton signed an Executive Order (Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 P.L.106-386), mandating the creation of the Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. Since then, federal efforts to police human trafficking has grown substantially, with several agencies dedicated to reporting services as well as their task forces. The Department of Homeland Security, for example,

launched the Blue Campaign to raise awareness and provide a reporting platform, as well as training for law enforcement agencies.

Minors are especially vulnerable to this, prompting many more local law enforcement agencies to create dedicated Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) and sex trafficking units. Since 2003, D.O.J.'s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has run their Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force Program that partners with over 4,500 federal, state, and local agencies to provide forensics, training, technical assistance, technology, victim services, and community education to partnering agencies. The program has increased funding since 2003 from $12.4 million to $28.6 million in 2018 (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, n.d.). These partnerships came to fruition in 2019 when the D.O.J.'s Operation *Broken Heart* resulted in a massive bust of 1,700 suspected online child sex offenders, coordinating the resources of 61 ICAC task forces in all 50 states (United States Department of Justice, 2019).

Today, the problem is accelerated by the Internet, where traffickers use online resources, such as communications and social media platforms, to entice potential victims, conduct their exploitations, and share as well as hide their criminal activities. While large social media sites, such as Facebook, actively monitor illegal activities, some sites facilitate prostitution and sex trafficking. The first popular site that facilitated sexual exploitation was online classified site Craigslist through its "Erotic Services" section in 2010, which had been the subject of intense public, law enforcement, and legal scrutiny. While law enforcement and the government argued that a section on erotic services would increase the risk to participants and increase prostitution while making law enforcement more difficult, researchers found that Craigslist reduced the female victim homicide rates by 5.4 percent and strangulation by 18.5 percent from better screening of clients (Cunningham, DeAngelo, & Tripp, 2019). Furthermore, the shutdown of Craigslist's erotic services section created a vacuum that led to the emergence of other sites with similar sections, with one of the largest being *Backpage.com* that operated from 2004 to 2018.

Similar to Craigslist, Backpage allowed users to post listings for sexual services in specific sections, such as "escorts", that facilitated sex trafficking. The blatant and open advertising, complete with explicit descriptions and photos, drew the attention and scrutiny of lawmakers and law enforcement. In 2018 the site was seized and shut down by the Department of Justice after its C.E.O. and corporate officers were arrested. However, the closure of Backpage largely unaffected online prostitution and sex trafficking as traffickers immediately began advertising on other sites. As seen with Craigslist, this displacement effect is common with online sex trafficking advertising (Heil & Nichols, 2014). Initial findings in this research suggests, however, that the closure of Backpage did not result in aggressive law enforcement action, but instead made enforcement *more* difficult with the proliferation of new,

foreign-based sites with no legal obligations to cooperate with investigators that operate essentially with impunity.

This research explores the dynamic nature of policing Internet sex trafficking and the difficulties presented to law enforcement in the post-Backpage era with data drawn from interviews with local police investigators assigned to Internet sex crimes. The data reveal that the complex and dynamic nature of the online environment has changed the nature of sex trafficking. This presents difficult challenges for investigators, who must apply strong investigative skills and contend with issues such as rapidly changing technology, dealing with tech companies, and working in partnerships with a variety of stakeholders. Furthermore, they must navigate a more complex legal landscape with jurisdictional issues that comes with the online environment and streams of digital evidence. The culmination of these challenges makes investigations lengthy and seemingly inefficient compared with traditional crimes.

Understanding these challenges will allow for public understanding of why investigations are so time and resource-intensive, will help to develop laws and policies to allow for more flexibility, support, and resources while underscoring the critical role these specialized investigators play. Several topics are explored in depth. First, the nature of online victimization shows the profound change created by the Internet and social media, making law enforcement both easier and more difficult. Second, investigators explain the misconceptions of Internet sex trafficking that can affect departmental, public, and political support of policing efforts. Next, a discussion of how sites such as Backpage, coupled with social media, has changed sex trafficking and reveals today's complex marketing schemes. Finally, we discuss the formation of collaborative law enforcement networks, applying the nodal governance theoretical framework as a model for overcoming the new complexities of the Internet environment.

Literature review

Sex trafficking and minors

The United States is a primary recruitment and destination country for child sex trafficking and exploitation (Fedina, Williamson, & Perdue, 2019; UNICEF USA, n.d.). Congress passed the bipartisan Trafficking Victims Protection Act [TVPA] of 2000 (and reauthorization in 2013), which defined sex trafficking as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons through force, fraud, coercion, or abuse for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation" (Fedina, Williamson, & Perdue, 2019, p. 2655). The TVPA recognizes any minor under 18 years of age as victims of sex trafficking regardless of force, fraud, or coercion on the grounds of age alone. Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak (2010) examined youth arrested for prostitution and found that 57 percent of these youth were exploited by businesses, such as massage parlors, escort services, gangs, internet

sites, and pimps or a boyfriend. Another 31 percent worked for themselves, while another 12 percent exchanged money for sex with family or known persons.

Due to their vulnerability, minors are at increased risk of sex trafficking. The prevalence rates are unknown due to the difficulty of finding victims and methodological limitations in previous research (see Fedina et al., 2019; Rand, 2010; Stansky & Finkelhor, 2008, 2012; Urban Institute, 2014). *The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children* has found that the average victim is 15 years of age. Factors such as an unstable home life significantly increase the "vulnerability" of youth. For example, of domestic sex trafficking, approximately 60 percent of these minors have a history of being in the child welfare system (Children's Rights, n.d.).

Research demonstrates that youth victims of sex trafficking experience violence at the hands of different players in the commercial sex industry (Klain, 1999; Miller & Schwartz, 1995). Additionally, they have higher rates of unplanned pregnancy, health issues including mental health, and sexually transmitted diseases (S.T.D.) and sexually transmitted infections (S.T.I.) (Farrow, Deisher, Brown, Kulig, & Kipke, 1992; Haley, Roy, Leclerc, Boudreau, & Boivin, 2004; Klain, 1999). In a study conducted by Fedina, Williamson, and Perdue (2019), the researchers sampled 115 current or former domestic child sex-trafficking victims and found that emotional and sexual abuse, rape, running away from home (strongest predictor), family members in sex work, and friends purchasing sex work were all significantly associated with these victims. Varma, Gillespie, McCracken, and Greenbaum (2015) compared youth with and without histories of commercial sexual exploitation and found that youth with exploitation were more likely to run away, experience substance abuse, and be involved with child welfare services or the juvenile justice system.

There are ways that states are combatting this exploitation of youth. One way is *safe harbor laws* that require a certain level of immunity for minors who engage in these practices (Roby & Vincent, 2017). Each state has variations of these laws, but they center on protecting youth from prosecution for prostitution and providing specialized services to these victims (Polaris Project, 2015). A second way is coordinating multidisciplinary teams, which usually includes law enforcement, child protection agencies, prosecutors, non-profits like victim advocacy agencies, treatment providers, and other experts (Roby & Vincent, 2017). These multidisciplinary teams work together to disseminate information to the victim about the possible resources available to them (Doyle, 2008).

Policing sex trafficking

Many aspects of policing sex trafficking have been written about in the past two decades and highlight several limitations. First, policing data is limited due to the conceptualization of sex trafficking. Definitional issues stem from multiple definitions put forth by multiple organizations and difficulties distinguishing sex trafficking from other crimes with similar elements. For instance, despite a

generally accepted definition introduced by the United Nations in 2000, it does not clearly distinguish between smuggling and trafficking (Meshkovska, Siegel, Stutterheim, & Bos, 2015), lacks distinction form prostitution, does not address domestic trafficking, and does not take into account the buying and selling of persons as a core element (de Heredia, 2007). In the U.S., definitional clarity is further obscured by the development of an assortment of state and federal laws. For instance, early laws focused more on restricting personal liberty over the movement of individuals, resulting in police and prosecutors struggling to define specific criminal elements as related to movement (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014).

Examinations of police investigative methods against sex trafficking show challenges from identifying sex trafficking due to its inherent nature. Using interview data with law enforcement and closed human trafficking cases, Farrell and Pfeffer (2014) note that sex trafficking is often underreported, from both the public and victims themselves, many of whom fear deportation and that police would not be of real assistance. Furthermore, they found police investigators without specialized training often misidentify trafficking victims as prostitutes. Moreover, investigations are often hampered by language barriers, cultural and structural impediments, weak relationships with victim service providers who do not trust bringing certain cases to police, and having no clear prosecutorial direction and guidance.

Researchers have also explored aspects of victimization. Villacampa and Torres (2017) employed qualitative interviews with criminal justice professionals, legal actors, and victim service providers in Europe to assess the identification of human trafficking victims. They found professionals often identified trafficking with prostitution as the most common form, in contrast to victim services, which were mostly unaware of its sexually exploitive nature. The researchers identified the lack of training by N.G.O.s and legal actors, resulting in difficulties identifying victims and referencing stereotypes of sex trafficking victims' forced participation in criminal activity as criminals, even during victim interviews. Moreover, they found that victims often failed to self-identify as victims by failing to see the exploitive nature of debt and not realizing their involvement in crime.

This study further explores the changing dynamics of victimization using similar qualitative methods, while adding the element of the online environment. This information has evolved from supply-driven predatory practices of exploiters seeking out potential victims to a demand-driven model where victims are lured and exploited. Moreover, social media has created an ideal marketplace to facilitate sex trafficking transactions and fundamentally change the nature of victimization from one that is demand-driven by exploiters looking for victims to supply-driven by victims hegemonically seeking out exploiters.

Challenge to law enforcement

Several philosophical and practical problems make policing sex trafficking difficult. Farrell and Pfeffer (2014) discuss police cultural and structural barriers that hinder investigations. They identify the lack of department-wide definitions of human trafficking that fail to prioritize and therefore allocate resources, requiring detectives to reframe the crime as more easily understood prostitution. Moreover, they found applying traditional investigative techniques and a reactive manner, such as surveillance and waiting for victims to come forth, was ineffective. This inability to effectively deal with human and sex trafficking often resulted in local agencies handing off cases to federal agencies, such as I.C.E., without collaborating. Farrell and Pfeffer also identified a structural issue where trained detectives relied on regular beat officers for initial contact of the victim, who tended to misreport and misclassify the offense as local prostitution before routing the case to a vice unit.

Farrell and Cronin (2015) discussed departmental challenges in enforcing new legislation that make for easier classification and prosecution of sex trafficking. They assert the static nature of policing caused by their complex bureaucratic structure that is rooted in culture and routines, is slow to adapt to new forms of crime and associated legal reform. In assessing the impact of the TVPA, which reclassified many acts of prostitution to sex trafficking on enforcement, they found a steep decline in prostitution arrests and enforcement activity. However, some departments in their sample increased arrests, pointing in part to organizational factors such as agency size, structure, and complexity.

In recent decades, the model for law enforcement in dealing with complex crimes, such as sex trafficking, has been collaborating with other security stakeholders and forming task forces. To some researchers, police have undergone a paradigm shift to deal with an increasingly complex society and corresponding complexity in crime. This societal change is driven by advancements in information and communications technology impacting all aspects of society. Castells (2000) called this new paradigm the "information society," where economic and cultural arrangements are governed by computer and human networks to manage this information. Policing modern society also requires a paradigm shift with police and police officers.

According to the nodal governance theoretical framework, police in the information society adapt in two ways: (1) forming collaborative networks; and (2) reorienting themselves as one stakeholder in security networks. Nodal networks consist of interconnected nodes, or institutions with their own set of security assets in the form of technology, culture, and resources (Burris, Drahos, & Shearing, 2005). Police in the information age acknowledge that they are no longer adequate in handling all aspects of security and must form collaborations with other security stakeholders, such as government, private security, corporations, N.G.O.s, and other nodes to share information and security resources or assets. More importantly, police are considered just one node in the network. This new "plural" arrangement

contrasts with the old hierarchical model where police monopolized security duties (Shearing & Wood, 2003). This model has been applied to assess policing cyberspace (Nhan, 2010).

Impact of the Internet

The Internet is an ideal environment to conduct sex trafficking. Online advertising sites, such as Craigslist and Backpage, facilitated trafficking for several reasons. First, online advertising is nearly ubiquitous. According to the Internet tracking site, Alexa, Craigslist currently ranks as the 27th in the U.S., with approximately 50 billion pageviews monthly. Second, there is no financial cost to advertise on these sites. Thirdly, these advertising sites are legitimate means to advertise that can discretely mask illicit activities with legitimate activities, such as massages or dates (Heil & Nichols, 2014).

Since the mid-1990s, the Internet has expanded the solicitation of sex and human trafficking (Kosloski, Bontrager-Ryan, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2017; Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008). Especially difficult to investigate, Internet sex crimes present several challenges to law enforcement (Makin & Bye, 2018). It presents a new dimension of solicitation and sex crimes, including increasing the accessibility of victims. For example, Craigslist and Backpage.com were the largest online advertising websites until Craigslist removed the adult services section due to continual allegations that it promoted prostitution and sex trafficking (Kennedy, 2012; Makin & Bye, 2018). As a result, Kennedy (2012) suggested that Backpage.com traffic increased by approximately 500,000 visits, lending support to the assumption that enforcement does not decrease online sex crimes; instead, users move to a different location (Holt, Blevins, & Kuhns, 2014).

Research approximates that Backpage.com profited approximately $22 million annually (Kristoff, 2012) and was the number one website for commercialized sex (Kennedy, 2012; Stalans & Finn, 2016). Early on, Backpage.com successfully defended its practices by arguing that restricting users would violate their First Amendment right to free speech (Backpage.com, L.L.C. v. McKenna). The company also argued that they actively monitored the site for solicitation, trafficking, and underage prostitution. They also claimed to assist law enforcement in investigating these crimes (Makin & Brye, 2018). In 2018, Backpage.com was seized and shut down by U.S. law enforcement, heralded by victim advocacy groups and political leaders around the nation. One senator tweeted, "Today, Backpage was shutdown. It's a huge step. Now, no child will be sold for sex through this website" (Lynch & Lambert, 2018, para. 7).

Despite the success of shutting down Backpage, curtailing sex trafficking remains difficult for law enforcement and can displace traffickers to other sites, creating a more decentralized marketplace. Heil and Nichols (2014) assert a displacement effect from the removal of solicitation advertising. Applying *displacement theory*, the authors argue that given the lucrative nature of sex trafficking and minimal risk and effort of relocating to other online services, displacement is inevitable. Moreover,

deterrence is undermined by policing and prosecutorial factors to charge offenders for sex trafficking as opposed to prostitution, such as establishing rape, illegal immigration, and other legal factors. The authors recommend *not* shutting down these sites and instead employ greater surveillance and intelligence gathering to track trafficking patterns for more effective enforcement (Heil & Nichols, 2014). In the case of Backpage, the attorney representing the site, Elizabeth McDougall, argued, "It breaks my heart we had to shut it down. Now the cops don't know where to find the kids or find the evidence. It hasn't stopped anything" (Aradillas, 2017, p. 70).

Victim location software has been developed specifically to assist law enforcement in the past few years. Carnegie Melon University student Emily Kennedy developed software designed specifically for locating victims of human trafficking using deep web mining algorithms now employed by the F.B.I. and other law enforcement agencies (Gannon, 2015). Other researchers have employed data visualization methods. Makin and Bye (2016) employed mapping locations of strip clubs and massage parlors with Backpage using Google search queries to identify prostitution and trafficking patterns and hot spots. They found correlations between Backpage use and the two legal markets.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of policing Internet sex trafficking. We employed a qualitative approach, drawing data from face-to-face interviews in the spring of 2019 with local police detectives and investigators assigned to Internet sex crime units. Investigators and detectives from two urban police departments in Texas participated in the interviews. Large, urban departments were chosen based on the presence of specialized units and investigators focused primarily on sexual offense cases and their frequent collaboration with federal agencies and task forces.

Once IRB approved the study, a convenience sample was taken of known respondents from the Internet Crimes Against Children Unit and the Sex Trafficking division under the Major Crimes Unit. Initial contact was made with potential participants through phone calls and emails explaining the purpose and nature of the study, privacy and other IRB-related requirements, and asking for their consent to participate. Additional interviews were made possible through snowball sampling with participants serving as gatekeepers to other investigators. This allowed for easier access to specialized investigators. Only fulltime investigators assigned exclusively to sex trafficking cases were interviewed, rather than general detectives whose caseloads may include human or sex trafficking. This allowed for better insight into the trends and patterns of sex trafficking. As such, only large departments have these specialized units.

There were 13 respondents in this study. The interviews took place at the police departments, and we used a semi-structured interview guide to ensure systematic topic coverage across participants. These

interviews typically lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Questions were based on general themes, such as the nature of cases and caseloads, victimization, and challenges unique to Internet sex trafficking (see Appendix for the interview guide). Oftentimes subjects would deviate from these questions but were encouraged to continue to understand the priorities as defined by participants.

Participants' ranks included one police officer, two sergeants (n=2) and ten participants who held the rank of detective. Due to the nature of these specialized units, created less than ten years ago, all officers interviewed had less than ten years of experience working exclusively on Internet sex crimes and trafficking. For most participants, the length of service in the unit was four years, except for the sergeant, who had significantly more law enforcement and supervisor experience. However, the officers had several years of experience before becoming eligible for detective promotion. The subjects were male (n=12), apart from one female officer. The unit in one department was nested within a larger task force that included federal agents, who were not interviewed for this study.

Despite the potential shortcomings of interviews, such as interviewer bias and subjects catering answers to maintain a positive image, we found the subjects to be very open and honest in discussing the difficulties. For example, subjects often brought up investigative failures and frustrations with the changing nature of trafficking sites. Subjects could focus on and expand to areas unanticipated by the researchers, revealing what was important to the subject.

The researchers transcribed the completed interviews and a thematic content analysis was utilized to discover emerging themes across the interviews. One of us conducted the initial thematic content analysis and the other reviewed the themes upon completion. If there was a question concerning the analysis, we discussed it and ultimately came to an agreement. Uncovering themes in the transcribed files in this manner allowed us to achieve complete agreement for all statements. Qualitative studies stress this inductive reasoning, such as using ethnographies and grounded theory, to allow for depth and meaning of answers (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2005). This method is effective in studying the nature of sex trafficking and has been employed by past research (See Vallacampa & Torres, 2017). The major themes found in this research are detailed below.

This study has obvious limitations and should be considered an exploratory guide for further inquiry. Qualitative studies are not generalizable. Though this study interviewed most of the law enforcement who work sex trafficking in two large metropolitan cities (note only a few large cities have dedicated Internet sex trafficking units), our sample size was small, and we did not interview other stakeholders in this industry, like nonprofits who work with victims. This should be a priority for future research to examine this topic from a holistic framework.

Findings

Unique victims

Prostitution is commonly described as a "victimless" crime, where all parties involved consent to the illegal act and do not recognize injury or harm. According to investigators interviewed, this sentiment is prevalent among sex trafficking victims. However, two distinctions of sex trafficking invalidate the claim of not having a victim. The first distinction is legally based on underaged victims. In the United States, minors who are sex trafficked by legal definition cannot give consent. According to the American Bar Association, under the TVPA, "any child involved in a commercial sex act and is under the age of 18 is by definition a victim" (Newcombe, 2015, para. 3). The second distinction is that the victims of sex trafficking need convincing that they are being victimized. According to investigators interviewed, nearly every girl they encountered did not feel law enforcement was rescuing or liberating them from forced sexual activity but instead, interfering with their consensual business. This often resulted in initial hostile attitudes toward officers.

Investigators today dispel the myth that most trafficking victims are trapped and need rescuing. According to investigators interviewed, virtually all girls they encountered were openly hostile to officers. One detective explained, "Some juveniles will come around after a while, after some months, and they usually do. As far as right off the bat, I've met one and she was an adult who genuinely wanted help and was glad to see us there and that was one case." The more common case is what another detective explained of a 17-year-old sex trafficking victim:

> She motherfucked us from the time that we got her all the way here to this office. We spent six hours with her that day, brought an advocate in to work with her, bought her a meal, set the food in front of her. That food sat in that wrapper and she never opened it. She wouldn't eat it.

Trafficking victims' loyalty is explained by the coercive nature of their relationship that develops over time to earn their trust. Developing that relationship is based on coercion and deception that evolves into something that seems real and genuine to the victim. Ultimately the victim becomes dependent while being exploited.

> Most these girls, when they get into it, they don't see themselves as victims. Usually it takes space and time and distance too, away from this until they come to the realization what they've actually having to do. These are girls that turn 10, 12 tricks a night for a happy meal, talking about crack. … These "Romeo pimps" develop this so-called relationship all there comes a time to flip, he's going to go to her and say, "Hey listen, you need to do something to help out the family." Once the first one's done, then he will get her on drugs.

For many victims, trafficking is a rational decision as a means to earn money. The reality, however, is that they do not realize their victimization.

> [The victims] often think they're getting the money. Maybe they did get some of the money but the pimp always make it seem like their boyfriend and they're together, so he might as well hold on to the money to keep it safe. She obviously can't keep it safe anyway since they got clients coming in and out. ... He'll get her hair done and her nails done. She gets proceeds of the money in a way but they never put the two and two together that he spent $20 on her for the night and she made $3,000 and she never got the rest of it.

The misconceptions of trafficking

Today there is much public concern and political attention paid towards migrants being forced into sex trafficking. However, while those victims do exist, investigators assert that that specific category is exaggerated. When asked the source of most sex trafficking, the investigators unanimously asserted their victims were local. One investigator explained:

> Largely what we see in child pornography and solicitation are children one street over. I've got cases with kids that are in this community that are born and raised here. People hear that [the victims are immigrants] and that picked up steam years ago and they hear that term and they think it's an international problem, it's only happening in big cities, and it's happening with poor, immigrant families that are brought over, but it's not. It's happening here, and local, and small cities and communities.

Another investigator from another police department echoed this sentiment almost exactly, answering:

> Local girls. The circumstances of smuggling people are completely different than trafficking, you have to understand that. The circumstance of smuggling puts people in position so that they could be trafficked, either labor trafficked, or sex trafficked. That exists in that world, it's just not we see a lot of. What we see the most are local girls and they have a ton of circumstances in common across the board but there are some that have none of the circumstances.

Furthermore, this focus on migrant children reflects a general confusion about sex trafficking. Specifically, sex trafficking is used interchangeably with human smuggling, which is the more accurate term. However, human trafficking is often misunderstood or even purposely misconstrued by different groups with ulterior agendas. This vernacular then becomes incorporated into the media and public discourse. One investigator explains the confusion as compared to other crimes:

> This crime is very political because it's an issue that the general public doesn't understand. Everybody knows what robbery is and everyone knows what a homicide is because that's in the

> news every day, but you hear human trafficking, you're like [what is that?]. A lot of people get it confused with human smuggling.

Another detective broke down the definitional differences between trafficking and smuggling, stating:

> So there's human trafficking, which includes human and sex trafficking. So the subset of that is sex trafficking. Prostitution is an adult who is voluntarily committing a sexual act for some sort of benefit. Sex trafficking is when it's a juvenile doing the sex acts because juveniles cannot consent to commercial sex. Adult sex trafficking is the same as prostitution but that third party is making her do it for some reason. Smuggling is a completely different crime. Smuggling is a crime against a border. Smuggling often turns into sex trafficking because they'll hold that debt against them.

One aspect of sex trafficking that is often overlooked is child pornography, which is a large portion of Internet sex trafficking that poses a real threat to potential child victims. Children are often recruited online by exploiters using social media, chat apps, and other platforms. One detective explained:

> There's a whole arena people aren't aware of. They hear sex trafficking and they think of the child who's being pimped out in a hotel room but what they don't take into consideration is sometimes the exploitation of the child in child pornography being produced and created is Internet sex trafficking. Then you have the solicitation and enticement of children on social media platforms which is a form of Internet sex trafficking.

Impact of social media and changing technology

The nature of advertising and marketing

Sex trafficking in the U.S. can be described today as an enterprise, complete with market research, a business strategy, and advanced marketing to maximize business and efficiency. Traffickers use a myriad of classified sites and social media to gauge demand for certain girls before deploying her to a certain area. Traffickers essentially pre-book appointments to line up clients. One detective explained this new phenomenon enabled by classified ads sites and social media:

> Let's say [a prostitute] is working with me. I can market her to a huge audience of people. I can setup pages in Atlanta and Houston and Los Angeles and find out where she's getting the most attention. If someone sees her picture and they're just clamoring for her in Atlanta, I can put her on a Southwest flight to Atlanta and there's 50 customers lined up to have sex with her.

Some traffickers essentially go on tour with women, creating a route with destination cities and a trail of clients. Traffickers use classified ads sites and social media strategically to market and pre-book the entire trafficking tour. One investigator explained:

> Another way they plan is they already have the route planned but they'll put the ads up prior to getting there. So maybe they'll post 3 days prior, get a bunch of people lined up and then head there. It's more efficient, you're not waiting for people to call once you get there. You have everyone set up.

The Internet and social media have changed the way traffickers advertise and market victims and fundamentally altered and reversed the recruitment of potential victims.

Victims and traffickers on social media

In the age of social media, girls are drawn to exploiters without personal contact. Instead, traffickers use social media platforms, such as Instagram, to broadcast and portray a celebrity-like lavish lifestyle. For instance, traffickers and pimps post photos and videos of themselves with luxury cars, counting stacks of money, and wearing expensive clothing and jewelry. Potential victims can easily find, follow, and eventually contact these traffickers using known hashtags. For example, girls can easily search the hashtag #304life, which is the numeric code for "hoe life." One detective explained the current trend, stating:

> Another big change is recruiting. Before it's hard to find a pimp. Now the pimps are big on recruiting online, mostly on social media. They're primarily on Instagram, snapchat, and then Facebook and they're getting the girls to come to them. Now they're flashing all the money and doing all this stuff. They throw on all the prostitution hashtags and girls get sucked in that way. They're getting recruited a lot easier now. Everyone has access to a phone.

These social media platforms include Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and online dating apps such as Tinder and Blendr. Traffickers often broadcast pictures with their girls sharing in that lifestyle, with captions indicating the gifts to the girls, including luxury cars. These higher-level girls often assist in managing new girls while at the same time insulating the trafficker. In return, the girls may get perks and benefits for recruitment and marketing. One investigator interviewed described the arrangement as a "sexual Ponzi scheme," describing the method as, "You bring two friends and you bring two friends."

Backpage and online classifieds

Backpage.com was the most popular online classified advertising site for prostitution and sex trafficking from 2014 to 2018, under the site's *escorts*, *women seeking men*, and *massage* sections. Despite its open illegal activities, the site benefited law enforcement. First, since Backpage was an American-run site with local offices, site administrators once cooperated with law enforcement to a certain extent. For example, investigators frequently requested and received information from the site. Second, the site's localized advertisements allowed investigators to locate victims and perpetrators as

well as gather information. Shutting down the site had unintended consequences. One detective explained:

> The way it was with the escort section and the description, if [they] just left Backpage alone, it would've been fine because they were very law enforcement friendly, as much as you can be. They send us subpoenaed information back immediately, they used to send tips to [reporting sites], so if they saw something that was underage, they submit it. Well, because of the backlash from nonprofits, communities and civilians, everyone was like, 'well we're not sending tips anymore because we're not going to be complicit.' We stopped getting tips. We stopped getting the key words that they're sweet or young or new or small or whatever.

These individuals and groups were quickly displaced to a myriad of foreign-based sites, making investigations much more difficult. One detective shared:

> It's been sort of terrible quite honestly. It didn't slow down the prostitution, it only made our detection of it more difficult. They went to like Cityvibe and others like Craigslist is very bad about responding to subpoenas and [they have moved to] the darknet.

Law enforcement's legal boundaries make policing and investigating crime on an abstract space puts them at a disadvantage in an endless cat-and-mouse game with exploiters and other criminals. For example, Internet darknets are decentralized networks built around privacy, anonymity, and security. Many Internet black marketplaces selling illicit goods and services are located on darknets, where users access the network using encrypted protocols and relays to mask location data for user anonymity. Coupled with cryptocurrency, these networks are extremely difficult to monitor and police. Networking technologies in the past few decades have forced law enforcement and its officers to make fundamental changes in order to adapt.

Collaborative investigations

Investigators interviewed all worked collaboratively with other sex trafficking security stakeholders and task forces. Consistent with the nodal governance framework, security assets in the form of information are shared among local and federal agencies in the task force. One detective explained the benefits and need to work collaboratively, calling it a "force multiplier," explaining, "We can get more accomplished [together more than] either unit can do themselves otherwise." Working collaboratively with other agencies allow investigators to overcome issues ranging from jurisdiction to contacts. Perhaps most valuable is information sharing. One detective explained:

> There are certain databases that they have, especially HSI related to immigration and all of that we obviously don't have access to and of course they have contacts all over the world so that they can reach out to any moment and not just HSI offices but even other federal agencies, like the FBI

> and all of that, so they can pull in a lot of expertise from other federal agencies easier than we can. … Same with us, we have access to the local databases so it works really well to work together.

Collaborations are not limited to other law enforcement agencies. Non-profits and other service organizations play a vital role in investigations, especially for dealing with the unique circumstances of sex trafficking victims. One investigator explained, "Our victims, most of the time they don't associate what they have to do was a criminal act. So many times, we need advocates to deal with the frame of mind, so they understand that they're being used." Victim advocates often develop a special long-term relationship with victims and ultimately convince them to cooperate with law enforcement. Oftentimes that relationship is developed using social media and other electronic forms. One investigator underscored their unit's dependence on victim advocacy groups in getting victims to acknowledge that they have been victimized and to cooperate with police, stating:

> For advocates, that's their sole job is to establish interpersonal contact with the victim. When they get to a point where [the victims] are legitimately ready to talk, then [the advocates are] an avenue for them to come back to us. We have a relationship with [advocate groups]. They know that if they get some prior victim who's ready to talk, they can bring them back to us. Sometimes that's six months, eight months, a year later. That's very different from other crimes where when someone doesn't want to cooperate, then [the case] is over. [These advocates] will utilize the latest technology, like social media to maintain contact and that relationship. Nowadays you keep in contact with people with a text message.

In addition to processing information, sex trafficking investigators have a different mindset required for successful outcomes. Investigators must have a level of technical acumen combined with compassion and personal commitment to helping victims. When asked about the technical nature of investigations, one detective asserted:

> My investigations are hugely technical. You don't always get this with Internet Crimes Against Children [investigators] but there are several of us in the metroplex that are also computer forensic examiners, so I think it's helpful to be a computer forensics person. You think about going into a home that deals with Internet trafficking or child exploitation. It doesn't just become a normal investigation because we're dealing with computers and phones.

Discussion and conclusion

Results from this study provide insight into a component of sex trafficking in the Internet environment. Our findings suggest that Internet advertising sites and social media have drastically changed the nature of sex trafficking victimization. At its core, sex trafficking remains unchanged as the exploitation of individuals for sex. However, the online environment seems to be more than

merely a new communications tool for an old crime in the proverbial, "old crimes in new bottles." Instead, core changes in victim-offender relations have taken place. Our research shows a reversal in the dynamic between exploiter and potential victim.

Specifically, in the past, exploiters, such as a pimp, often needed to seduce potential victims. Many past studies have focused primarily on exploitive techniques. For example, a 2007 exploratory study of the recruitment process found that it involves a combination of love, debt, drugs, brute force or violence (the "gorilla technique"), and position of authority (Kennedy, Klein, Bristowe, Cooper, & Yuille, 2007). When combined with the push of entering prostitution, such as a financial situation or drug addiction, some women sought out pimps. Today, pimps and other exploiters use technology to market, manage, and run their operations entirely using their smartphone without even having to meet the victims in person. According to the University of Toledo Human Trafficking and Social Justice Institute, social media has allowed exploiters to find victims without meeting face-to-face while masking cues that indicate the person is dangerous (Kunz, Baughman, Yarnell, & Williamson, 2018). A 2018 report found that 42 percent of victims never met their trafficker in person and yet were still exploited with the help of social media (Bouché, 2018).

With social media, potential victims are drawn to exploiters and actively seek their attention without personal seduction. Initially, victims do not see themselves as victims but in a consensual business with their traffickers. These attitudes reflect the psychological manipulation of victims who do not realize the exploitive and coerced relationship with their traffickers. The lack of understanding of the nature of victimization has resulted in ineffective law enforcement efforts. For example, prostitutes and at-risk minors were shown to be loyal to their pimps, refused to testify, and returned to their exploiters after release from arrest despite a history of mistreatment (Schetky, 1988). Marcus, Horning, Curtis, Sanson and Thompson (2014) found similar patterns in their qualitative research on sex trafficking in New York City and Atlantic City.

Our research, coupled with newer research on internet sex trafficking, suggests sex trafficking is different than forms studied in older research. As such, sex trafficking victims might not identify as victims initially and refuse to cooperate with authorities. If so, law enforcement and victim service agencies might need to take a different approach when working with this population as they may not see themselves as victims. This change in law enforcement's role in sex trafficking cases parallels larger fundamental changes in policing in general in the information age and Internet environment.

Police officers' roles in the information age have shifted from primarily law enforcer to what Ericson and Haggerty (1997) label as "knowledge workers." Officers' primary function is to collect and process information in order to manage risk and minimize danger. After each case, more information is then recorded back into the database. The next officer can use this cumulative information to assess and deal with future threats. The more information an officer has, the more risk that can be managed. The

culmination of policing information and experience in dealing with sex trafficking over the past two decades has changed the perspective of police in sex crimes and victimization, especially in the age of social media.

The investigators interviewed stressed the vulnerability of children with the reach of computers and smartphones that give exploiters access to once protected spaces, such as the home. For example, exploiters can setup a child pornography subscription streaming service without ever making physical contact with the youth. Locating, arresting, and prosecuting these offenders have proven onerous, leading some researchers to look for more advanced technical solutions while describing current policing methods as "primitive" and "inefficient" (Schell, Martin, Hung, & Rueda, 2007).

The sophistication of exploiters using the Internet can be described as a lucrative enterprise, complete with advanced advertising and marketing indistinguishable from a legitimate business. Findings from this study suggest that Backpage was an easily replaceable tool. Specifically, other sites have replaced Backpage and might not cooperate with law enforcement as well as Backpage officials. Some of these displacement sites, like Megapersonals, seem to show even more copious amounts of nudity and appear to be worse than Backpage ever was. Therefore, simply shutting down sites are temporary "feel good" measures that do not actually decrease trafficking. As the executive director of Rights4Girls, a human-rights organization, said about Backpage's sex ads being eliminated "until we see a more comprehensive solution, it is going to pop up elsewhere" (Williams, 2017, para. 11).

Lastly, there seems to be a misperception that most trafficking is international or involve immigrants as victims. Though these individuals are victims and should not be less valued or ignored, law enforcement and society should understand the scope and danger of domestic sex trafficking as the overwhelming majority of victims our respondents worked with were domestic. As such, there is a danger that untrained local law enforcement might misidentify sex trafficking victims as only prostitutes, a danger Ferrell and Pfeffer (2014) note in their study. More research should be conducted on domestic sex workers in the U.S.

Despite these methodological limitations, this exploratory research is among a few published studies that have looked at sex trafficking through the contemporary lens of technology and social media. As the nature of the trafficking and policing is rapidly evolving, capturing and measuring this remains tricky, as shown by the drastic change in an aim of this research to assess the marketing of online solicitations. Understanding these dynamics is important in moving forward to develop more robust policing methods in detection and enforcement.

Based on our initial findings, we suggest police departments reorient their sex crimes units from silos to team models. For instance, vice units, crimes against children, major case units, etc. should work closely with or be integrated with sex crimes units. Furthermore, all line-officers should be trained at

a minimum to detect and distinguish between prostitution and sex trafficking and channel these cases to appropriate investigative units. All police units and officers should work closely with other security stakeholders, such as social workers and N.G.O.s, to establish a robust security network focused on victim services, and more importantly, develop methods to help victims realize their exploitation.

Departments should continue to be active in monitoring Internet ad sites and social media. In addition to specialized software that can help detect victims, officers should be active on various sites with location-based advertising, such as personals based in their cities, to locate victims and bust rings. We see evidence of this active policing with the more recent 2020 takedown and owner arrest of CityXGuide.com, a sex trafficking website that touts itself as "taking over from where Backpage left off" (CBSDFW, 2020).

Perhaps the most significant challenges are cultural and structural in nature. Policing Internet sex trafficking is very time consuming due to the nature of victims and the technical nature of the crimes. This requires police management to acknowledge its importance and allocate more resources and be more patient as cases develop and victims come forward. Directly comparing these units to traditional detective units may be counterproductive as sex trafficking units appear inefficient.

Future research is critical in developing models of analysis beyond limited qualitative interviews and expand upon all stakeholders (N.G.O.s, federal agencies, etc.). Mapping these stakeholders and looking at their intersectionality in terms of culture and structure to identify points of conflict should be considered. Furthermore, this mapping can be done with online social networks and advertising sites to identify hot spots for sex trafficking. This may require applying lenses that are not part of the criminological methodologies but perhaps marketing research and analysis. Given the complexities and rapid changes of Internet sex trafficking and lack of overall research in this growing problem, it may be the academics, not just the police, who are also caught in the cat-and-mouse game of understanding its nature and finding solutions.

Appendix

Appendix A. Interview questions

- How big of a problem is Internet sex trafficking?
- What is the nature of the evidence?
- How do you work collaboratively with other agencies? What is the nature of that relationship?
- How do you distinguish between prostitution and trafficking?
- What is the typical demographic of victims and perpetrators? How do you treat each?
- What are some legal difficulties? How do you deal with jurisdiction?
- What is the nature of a typical investigation?

- What are the challenges and difficulties or advantages of the Internet environment?
- What is the impact of social media?
- How have things changed in the past decade?
- Who are the officers that are best suited for this work? What are their skills like? Technical and otherwise? What level of education is needed?
- How does one get assigned to this line of work?

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