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Effects of Sex Trafficking on Youth and Identification: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Fighting the effects of sex trafficking on youth is a challenge for many reasons, including negative effects of trafficking and the inability of victims to self-identify or realize they are being sexually exploited. This literature review examined current research on the physical, psychological, and social effects of sex trafficking on youth, and how to identify youth who do not self-identify as victims of sex trafficking. Current studies show that some physical effects youth victims of sex trafficking confront are sexually transmitted diseases (STD's), other diseases and infections, physical injuries, substance abuse, and malnutrition. Studies also show that victims may suffer psychological effects, such as disruption in family and peer relationships, difficulty in trusting others, forced secrecy, trauma symptoms, anger control problems, conduct disorder, depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Youth involved in sex trafficking also often demonstrated self-harm and suicidal behaviors. Studies also revealed social difficulties with developing healthy relationships with family and others, trusting adults, and physical fighting or other violent tendencies. Understanding the physical, psychological, and social effects of trafficking can help professionals in identifying affected youth. Guidelines have been presented in research to aid professionals in identifying victims who may be trafficked but have not self-identified or do not realize their exploitation. More research is required to further understand how professionals can use knowledge of effects of trafficking to identify, rescue, and treat youth involved in sex trafficking.

Effects of Sex Trafficking on Youth and Identification: A Literature Review

Human trafficking is on the rise, currently estimated to be the “second largest criminal industry in the world”. The popularity of this industry could be due to many factors, such as the high revenue and the availability of victims living in poverty and desperate circumstances (Blossom, 2011). According to Human Rights First (2017), human sex trafficking is forcing or coercing someone into commercial sex acts. A commercial sex act can include forced prostitution and sexual acts for pornography, as well as trading sex for food and shelter (Ijadi-Maghsoodi, Cook, Barnert, Gaboian, Bath, 2016).

Current statistics show that there are approximately 20 to 30 million trafficked victims. It is estimated that there are 14,500 to 17,500 people trafficked into the U.S. alone every year (Human Rights First, 2017). Most are women, but many are men and an estimated 25% are children (Human Trafficking Center, 2016). United Nations International Youth's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) reported in 2002 that 1.2 million of trafficked humans are children (UNICEF, 2011). More recent reports show higher numbers of 2 million and estimate that a little over 50% are sexually exploited (Equality Now).

This sexual exploitation is highly profitable for traffickers, although professionals have difficulty in determining how much revenue is generated. Some estimate that human traffickers make \$10 to \$42 billion (Blossom, 2011) and some estimate much higher: approximately \$150 billion per year (Human Rights First, 2017). Much of the high revenue—approximately two thirds—comes from sexual exploitation (Human Trafficking Center, 2016). In one case in the Netherlands, a trafficker was estimated to make \$18,148 a month per victim (Human Rights First, 2017), and numbers can vary depending on the trafficker and the demographics.

Fighting the effects of sex trafficking is a challenge for many reasons. Youth involved in sex trafficking are often deceived by the trafficker (who usually takes advantage of desperate circumstances), and thus face the incapacitating psychological effects of betrayed trust (Bennet-Murphy, 2012). Victims also lose a sense of home as they are removed from family, friends, and often culture, and so feel ostracized and alone (Bennet-Murphy, 2012). Perhaps even more challenging is the obstacle of finding youth to treat and participate in research because they commonly do not self-identify or are kept from self-identification by the trafficker. Identification guidelines have been created to aid medical professionals in identifying victims, so they can be rescued and treated (Bennet-Murphy, 2012).

There have been two recent literature reviews regarding youth in sex trafficking. Muraya and Fry (2016) wrote a literature review examining the current aftercare service and their effectiveness for youth involved in sex trafficking. Their literature review focused on the aftercare of children who have been involved in trafficking. The second literature review written by Jordan, Patel, and Rapp (2013) examined various aspects of sex trafficking of youth. They discussed some risk factors that can lead youth to become victims of sex trafficking. They also discussed some of the legal aspects of sex trafficking, and listed characteristics common of victims, buyers, and traffickers. They also provided a brief review on treatment options and gave recommendations for improvement. While including various information about global sex trafficking, their review focused primarily on sex trafficking within the United States (Jordan, Patel, & Rapp, 2013). This literature review will examine the current research on physical, social, and psychological impacts of sex trafficking on trafficked youth, and how to identify sexually exploited youth to be treated.

Methods

I used the EBSCO database to search for articles. I searched using the key words “sex trafficking”, “youth”, and “treatment or intervention or therapy”. This search yielded sixty-eight results. I filtered my search by selecting only peer reviewed articles, which left thirty-eight articles. I did not filter by year because the oldest article the search yielded was published in 2004. I then read through the titles and abstracts of these articles to evaluate which ones pertained specifically to the identification and treatment of child sex trafficking victims, and the impacts of sex trafficking on youth. In finding the Muraya and Fry review, I edited my review to focus solely on effects of sex trafficking and using the effects to help identify youth. I then eliminated articles that primarily focused on treatment of youth in sex trafficking. After this process, I was left with eleven articles. The other eight articles were found by searching for statistics and facts about sex trafficking using Google search engine.

Results

Youth involved in sex trafficking face many physical and psychological dangers and can suffer socially after rescue. In many studies, victims show high rates of mental disorders because of trafficking, and almost all study participants reported violence and physical injury from the trafficker. This section will present physical, psychological, and social effects of sex trafficking on victims based on the articles that were reviewed. It will then review some of the guideline that have been created to help identify youth who are being sexually exploited.

Physical Effects

Many physical dangers can result from sex trafficking. An overt danger of sexual exploitation is the risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STD's; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016). In a study (2018) of familial sex trafficking, 90% of participants reported having an STD, pregnancy, or injury because of sexual exploitation (Sprang & Cole). Youth involved in sex

trafficking are exposed to several types of sexual contact with multiple partners on a regular basis and are at a much higher risk of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV, also known as AIDS), due to several reasons. Trafficked victims have no command over their sexual activity, so they are often exposed to violent sex acts, anal sex, and other high risk sexual activity. They are often not permitted to receive medical help when injured and are forced to continue sexual activity with other partners, increasing the risk of disease (Kloer, 2010). Sexually exploited youth are also at high risk of other STD's such as herpes, gonorrhea, and syphilis (Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017).

Violent sex as well as sexual abuse are not uncommon in sex trafficking, and victims are often left injured from clients as well as from the trafficker (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016). One study from a specialized treatment program showed that a little over half of the participating victims had issues with sexual development because of exploitation (Landers, McGrath, Johnson, Armstrong, & Dollard, 2017). Victims can be left with broken bones or wounds and can develop infections (Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017). As previously stated, these injuries are not always treated immediately or ever, leaving the victim with poorer physical health.

In addition to STD's and physical injuries, substance use rates are exceptionally high for sexually exploited youth — more than 50% of victims report regular drug usage — which has a negatively impacting victim's health (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016). The Lander et al. study found that about 47% of victims struggled with substance abuse to the point of interference with functioning (Landers et al., 2017).

Drug usage in and of itself is dangerous, but circumstances may make drugs, as well as sickness and physical injuries more dangerous. Victims are often exposed to malnutrition and unsanitary living conditions, increasing the risk of infection and harm from drug usage, and

making it harder for a victim to recover. Victims with chronic medical conditions also suffer physically as their conditions go untreated (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016). Many sexually exploited youth also face malnourishment and unhealthy weight loss, making it more difficult for their bodies to fight infections (Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017).

Psychological Effects

The physical effects often amplify the psychological effects caused by sex trafficking. Many of the physical dangers trafficked victims encounter directly correlate with psychological effects suffered during and after trafficking. For example, youth involved in sex trafficking suffer “maltreatment, exposure to violence, threats of death, coercion, isolation, and poor living situations”, leading to a variety of psychological disorders including depression, anxiety, and especially posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016, p. 115). A study by Sprang and Cole (2018) reported 80% of participants had been diagnosed with PTSD. These psychological effects are often heightened by substance abuse (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016).

Another psychological effect of sex trafficking on youth is disruption in relationships. Youth are removed from family and friends and lose the ability to create healthy relationships (Bennet-Murphy, 2012). Youth born of trafficking and then used as victims may grow up without experiencing any healthy relationships. They may not even experience a healthy relationship with the mother, who often experiences negative feelings towards the child who came from unwanted and forced sexual interactions. Even if the mother loves and cares properly for the child, he or she is still often forced to witness the mother’s sexual exploitation and abuse, and experiences exploitation and abuse as well. Furthermore, the child may develop negative feelings towards the mother for the personal abuse and exploitation he or she experiences

(Surtees, 2017). The child can suffer psychologically from lacking a healthy parental relationship as well as the loss of familial relationships and other friendships.

Because of disruption in relationships, youth in sex trafficking also struggle with trust. Victims are often not kidnapped or coerced into trafficking but are tricked into it by the trafficker. Many youth in desperate circumstances are approached by a trafficker who gains their trust, only to later betray it as the youth are trafficked. This has a critical psychological impact on the victim's ability to trust anyone, even after being rescued. Not only does the victim suffer from a shattered trust, but the trafficker isolates the victim from the rest of the world. This leads to difficulties in the victim being able to develop relationships with other people after rescue, which is a major obstacle in recovery as it makes it difficult for a rescued victim to develop a trusting relationship with his or her therapist (Bennet-Murphy, 2012).

Difficulties in trusting and developing relationships are only a couple psychological issues trafficked victims face. Another psychological effect that victims face is secrecy. Being isolated from the rest of the world, victims are forced to live in secrecy. This effect can be described as a loss of voice. Many sex trafficking victims are taken somewhere unfamiliar with a different language and culture. Without the ability to communicate, and without someone to communicate with, the life of a victim becomes a secret, and the experience of sex trafficking makes it hard to share once the victim is finally rescued (Bennet-Murphy, 2012). This can be a psychological obstacle for therapists working with youth involved in sex trafficking.

There are many other psychological effects sexually exploited youth face. The Landers et al. study found that 77% of youth in the program had oppositional behavior, 68% struggled with adjustment to trauma, 62% suffered with depression, and 51% with anxiety. There were 54% of participants who struggled with anger control, and 55% with conduct disorder (Landers

et al., 2017). This concurs with the findings from the Cole et al. study (2016) which compared characteristics of commercially sexually exploited youth to youth who had been sexually abused or assaulted but not commercially. The study showed that commercially sexually exploited youth had higher levels of functional impairment, risk behaviors, clinical problems, and trauma symptoms than youth who had been sexually abused. Sexually exploited youth also showed higher levels of PTSD (Cole, Sprang, Lee, & Cohen, 2016). These psychological effects can lead to self-harm and suicidal behaviors, which was shown as much more prevalent in sexually exploited victims (50%) than national averages (8-10%) in the Sprang and Cole study (Sprang & Cole, 2018).

Social Effects

Many of the social effects of sex trafficking on youth are intertwined with the psychological effects. Disruption of relationships and difficulties with trust not only affect youth victims psychologically, but socially as well. For example, returning to the family after trafficking can be difficult for youth, especially youth born because of trafficking. Family members often feel anger, frustration, and confusion, particularly when they have not been accounted the full story of the trafficking. Negative feelings directed towards a trafficked mother returning with a child born of trafficking can lead to negative views of the trafficked child as well, both from family and from the community (Surtees, 2017). The absence of healthy relationships during trafficking can also make it difficult for victims to develop relationships with others after.

Difficulties with trust is another psychological effect that can affect the social life of youth who have been trafficked. Youth who develop trust in a trafficker, only to have that trust betrayed as they are taken into trafficking often experience difficulties in trusting other people after rescue. This is a major obstacle in recovery as it makes it difficult for a rescued victim to

develop a trusting relationship with his or her therapist, and it can be difficult for a victim to develop trusting relationships socially (Bennet-Murphy, 2012). Trusting any adult can be difficult as trafficked youth may often view adults as a threat (Sapiro, Johnson, Postmus, & Simmel, 2015).

There are other psychological effects that contribute to social disruption. Youth who struggle with conduct disorder and anger control because of sex trafficking often struggle socially. The Landers et al. study reported that 32% of participants experience problems with family, school, and peers because of difficult controlling anger. About 22% of the youth in the study reported such severe anger control problems as to cause physical fights with others. Conduct also showed effects on social success, shown by the 25% of participants that showed antisocial behaviors, including manipulation and violence towards others, and well as lying and stealing (Landers et al., 2017).

Due to the nature of sex trafficking and developing legal aspects regarding sex trafficking, some youth are viewed as perpetrators rather than victims, and can be discriminated against. This could be especially true for victims who are illegal immigrants or who are coerced into prostitution as a form of sex trafficking. They may face discrimination where they are trafficked and in their home country upon returning (Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017).

Identifying Victims

Understanding the physical, psychological, and social effects of trafficking can help professionals in identifying victims. One of the major difficulties in researching human trafficking is that many victims do not identify themselves as victims, and this could especially be true for youth. Youth involved in sex trafficking may feel shame and guilt because of the trafficking experience. Victims also normally fear their trafficker, who closely monitors the

victims. Being closely watched by the exploiter can prevent a victim from finding opportunity to report the exploitation, and fear of being killed can be an even greater psychological obstacle for a victim. Many victims are trafficked outside of their home country or state. This can prevent a victim from identifying himself or herself because of a lack of understanding of the culture and local law enforcement (Greenbaum, 2014).

Many sexually exploited youth come in contact with medical health professionals, but often go unidentified. In the article “Understanding and Responding to the Needs of Commercially Sexually Exploited Youth” (2016), Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al. presented some basic guidelines for medical professionals to use in identifying youth victims of sex trafficking based on appearance and behavior, social history, medical history, and mental health symptoms. Some of the factors to look for in appearance and behavior are as follows: a child is accompanied to a clinic by a controlling person that does not want the child to be alone; the child is withdrawn or frightened; the child gives changing demographic information; the child has signs of intoxication, or many physical injuries; the child has expensive possessions beyond his or her means. Other factors to watch for in the social history are as follows: the child has a history of homelessness; the child has a history of multiple sexual partners; the child has a history of juvenile delinquency; the child has a history of being in child welfare services; the child does not attend or misses a lot of school. Medical history factors to be attentive to are as follows: the child has had abortions or pregnancies; the child has an (or many) STD(‘s); the child has frequent visits to the emergency room. The mental health symptoms common in youth victims of sex trafficking are as follows: the child has symptoms of depression; the child is suicidal; the child has symptoms of PTSD, trauma, or anxiety; the child has substance use disorder symptoms; the child is aggressive; the child shows self-harming behaviors. Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al. added a note

that these signs do not guarantee that the youth is a victim of sex trafficking, but that these are common symptoms in youth who have been trafficked (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016, p. 114).

This is the most comprehensive article with identifying factors that I found in my research.

These guidelines can help medical professionals who may encounter sexually exploited youth in identifying them as victims and helping them receive treatment. As Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al. stated, the listed symptoms are not strict in identifying a child as a victim of sex trafficking, but they are helpful guidelines in leading professionals to find more victims and helping them to escape trafficking and to receive treatment. As more medical professionals use the guidelines to identify victims, we can hope that more youth will find help to overcome the detrimental effects of sex trafficking.

Limitations

One limitation in this literature review is my personal evaluation of the articles reviewed. After completing the search in the EBSCO database, I personally evaluated the results to determine which articles would be used in the article, and I did this by reading through the article titles and abstracts only. There could have been valuable details in the other articles that were not included because I did not assess the article to be pertinent to the review based solely on its title and abstract.

Another limitation is that I did not complete a new search after changing my thesis to exclude treatment of youth in sex trafficking. Because of this, there could be other articles regarding identification of youth involved in sex trafficking that I did not review. However, there is still little research on identification of youth in sex trafficking, so it is likely that there were not many articles missed.

A third limitation in my review is that many of the articles published about youth involved in sex trafficking are not published research studies but are a compilation of what a few studies have found on specific or general aspects of sex trafficking of youth. Because of this, my review is widely based on such articles rather than empirical studies.

Discussion

Current research on sex trafficking of youth is limited. Much of the current research focuses on women in sex trafficking, but there is much more needed on men and youth. The issue is still a somewhat new one as most of research on sex trafficking has only been published within the last fifteen years. The current research has revealed many of the physical, psychological, and social effects of sex trafficking on youth, and how to identify youth so that they can be treated.

The purpose of this review was to examine the research and to provide a synthesis of the information to better help professionals understand how to help this population. Youth involved in sex trafficking may face many physical effects, such as physical injuries, illnesses, and disease. They also confront many psychological challenges such as PTSD, anxiety, depression, trust and relationship development issues, and anger control. They naturally face social effects as a result, such as difficulties in trusting adults and developing healthy relationships with family and others.

Knowing these effects of sex trafficking on youth is critical in being able to identify youth who do not or are unable to self-identify. Not every youth involved in sex trafficking will encounter professionals while being exploited, but many do because of the effects of sex trafficking. Youth who obtain physical injuries or diseases because of trafficking may encounter health professionals if they are admitted to the hospital or visit a clinic. Youth attending school

who are exploited could be identified by academic professionals who track attendance or work with these youth in mental health care settings. If professionals do not understand the effects of sex trafficking on youth, they will not be able to properly identify them as needing assistance to escape exploitation and receive treatment. Many professionals have not yet encountered youth in sex trafficking, but the issue is becoming more widespread as sex trafficking rates rise, and it is imperative that professionals become aware of the effects of sex trafficking on youth to help identify and treat affected youth.

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