



JOURNAL of PEDIATRIC NURSING

Official Journal of the
Society of Pediatric Nurses and the
Pediatric Endocrinology Nursing Society

EDITORIAL

The Tragedy and Horror of Human Trafficking of Children and Youth

The scourge of human trafficking is one of the most rapidly rising criminal activities in the world involving not only vulnerable adults but also helpless children and youth who are enslaved, abused and exploited in unimaginable circumstances. The extent to which children and youth are trafficked is difficult to estimate because these victims are hidden, silenced with threats of violence, and are forced to endure continued abuse creating fear and submissiveness. The estimates of children and youth who are trafficking victims range from 600,000 to over 2 million children and youth (United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking [UN.GIFT], n.d.; United States Department of State, Human Smuggling and Trafficking Center [UN HSTC], 2006). Human trafficking refers to the “recruitment, transport, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a person by such means as threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, or fraud or deception for the purpose of exploitation” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2012). An advocacy organization to stop human trafficking has noted that it “...is considered to be one of the fastest growing criminal industries in the world” (Polaris Project, 2010, p. 1).

Children and youth trafficking victims are used for forced labor, commercial sex purposes and serve as child soldiers (UN.GIFT, n.d.; United States Department of State, 2010). Trafficking for commercial sex refers to victims who are “...induced by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age (U.S. DOS, 2010, p. 9). The labor trafficking of victimized children and youth refers to the “...recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery” (U.S. DOS, 2010, p. 9). The trafficking of children to serve as soldiers “...involve the unlawful recruitment or use of children—

through force, fraud, or coercion—as combatants or for labor or sexual exploitation by armed forces” (U.S. DOS, 2010, p. 12).

Children and youth who are trafficked for these purposes are likely to be transported across domestic state borders or across international borders globally. Although children who are considered “trafficked” need not cross-geographic boundaries as they are exploited victims. The majority of victims who are trafficked for commercial sex are women and girls who are younger than 18 years (UDOS HSTC). The average age of girls recruited for prostitution is between 12 and 14 years (Bart 2012). According to a United Nations’ report, 42% of victims know the perpetrator; mostly victims are recruited or abducted by criminal strangers (UN.GIFT, n.d.).

The horrid trafficking of children and youth is done to generate illicit revenue. The monies generated by trafficking are enormous. Estimates vary from 12 to 31 billion dollars a year (UN.GIFT, n.d.). Nearly half of the revenue is generated in industrialized countries. Unfortunately, prosecution of traffickers is minuscule as just 1 in 800 cases (Stop Child Trafficking Now 2012; UN.GIFT, n.d.). The United States Department of State’s (2010) recent report, “Trafficking in person”, refers to the annual number of prosecutions as “...dismally low in comparison to the scope of the problem” (p. 14).

Scant empirical evidence exists to better inform the professional community and the public about this human calamity. Risk factors associated with trafficking victims have been identified. Victims typically come from poor families, have limited education and are unable to speak for themselves. Many have lived in emotionally and physically abusive environments. Those who are trafficked from international sites may come from politically unstable regions. At risk behaviors observed in youth victims include use of illicit substances, deterioration in academic performance, dropping out of school, associating with older male companions and unexplained absences or secretive activities (UN HSTC, 2006, 2008).

Elimination of human trafficking of child and adolescent victims requires the involvement of professionals from health care, social services, and juvenile justice. Advocates such as the Soroptimist International, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Polaris Project and Stop Trafficking Now are just a few of the organizations dedicated to calling attention to this domestic and international problem. Awareness of the child and youth trafficking issue is the important first step to its elimination. Awareness, acknowledgement and understanding of this child and youth health problem can result in recognizing those who are at risk as well as those who are victims. This is an important public health issue that warrants greater attention and involvement of child health nurses and professionals. For further information about this serious issue, the Web sites listed below will be helpful:

Just Yell Fire (<http://www.justyellfire.com/>). This Web site is targeted for young girls (ages 11 to 19) and college age women to provide them with resources and information as a means to empower them to prevent dating abuse, date rape and trafficking. This non profit was initially developed by Dallas Jessop, now a college student, when she was 14 years old.

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. This non profit organization is a multifaceted resource for missing and sexually exploited children. The organization works with law enforcement to locate missing children, prosecute offenders and works with legislators to develop laws to protect children. It serves as a national clearinghouse to provide resources to law enforcement, parents, children and professionals.

Polaris Project (<http://www.polarisproject.org/>). The Polaris Project is a comprehensive resource on human trafficking and sex slavery. Services offered by the Polaris Project include: client services; training, technical assistance and consultation for advocates and coalitions; and policy advocacy.

Soroptimist (<http://www.soroptimist.org/stoptrafficking.html>). This international woman's organization is involved in raising awareness about human trafficking. As part of their advocacy efforts, the organization hosts an annual event, entitled,

International Day for the Abolition of Slavery. The Web site offers resources on sex trafficking, description of services and advocacy efforts provided by Soroptimist.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Nancy J. Goodell, MS, DMT-R, who introduced me to this issue and provided assistance with obtaining resource materials.

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