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Editorial

Human trafficking matters: Next steps

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The quest to end human trafficking is both a global and local phenomena. Worldwide efforts to prevent the transportation and exploitation of human beings as commodities has resulted in a three-tier strategy focused on prevention of trafficking, prosecution of offenders and protection of victims through the provision of appropriate social services. To date, human trafficking is mostly perceived on an objective and not subjective level. There are frequent media accounts of human trafficking so that people are aware and recognize that something must be done, but unlike more common crimes, a majority of people do not personally know anyone that is a victim of human trafficking or who has been arrested for the offense. This lack of subjective experiences and personal encounters with human trafficking present challenges for efforts both to keep human trafficking in the public consciousness and listed as a priority for funding for social problems. Social scientists would do well to consider how research, practice and policy on human trafficking might strengthen public perception of the importance of preventing human trafficking, prosecuting offenders, and protecting victims.

Regarding the prevention of human trafficking, most efforts have focused on raising the awareness of the problem of human trafficking for the general public and providing customized training for the those most likely to encounter victims and offenders – law enforcement officers, social service workers and emergency medical professionals. Some jurisdictions have expanded the training to include school workers and businesses. Because the problem of human trafficking is sometimes segmented into two distinct problems, one of commercial sexual exploitation (especially of minors) and a second of forced labor (often in countries seeking migrant agricultural

workers), training often is directed to only one of these two areas. However, to sustain and elevate public concern of human trafficking, both a multi-sector approach (law enforcement, schools, churches, non-governmental organizations, businesses, social services) and training on all types of human trafficking is necessary for success.

A second strategy promoting the prevention of human trafficking has been the utilization of hotlines phone numbers made available for both witnesses and victims of human trafficking. Research on the effectiveness of hotlines is lacking, and still unknown is the extent to which hotlines either raise awareness of the issue of human trafficking for the general public or the extent to which they provide the most useful means for victims to extract themselves from human trafficking. Future research would necessarily be localized, but social scientists should consider how other means of communication might be more relevant for implementation and evaluation. For example, in the past, personal contact by outreach workers to street children has been believed to be an effective means to contact victims of commercial sexual exploitation, but today, the evolution of social media and technology use by minors may provide more effective interventions.

Regarding the prosecution of offenders, criminal justice researchers have struggled to define the exact nature and extent of human trafficking both at the local, national and global levels. Part of the difficulty in determining exactly how prevalent human trafficking is in a given area is the confusing manner in which crimes are prosecuted. For example, a person might be charged with the criminal offenses of prostitution and/or kidnapping in addition to human trafficking, with some of these charges later dropped as part of plea bargaining.

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Only recently have law enforcement agencies begun to prioritize human trafficking and attempted to keep more accurate statistics.

Other than official criminal justice statistics, the only other method of determining the nature and extent of human trafficking in a specific place has been the use of social science. This too is an under-researched area primarily because victims are frequently reluctant to self-identify and often weary of strangers. Although sensational news media accounts of human trafficking keeps human trafficking on the minds of the public, only long-term documentation of the problem will provide the necessary rationale for increased funding for social services.

Finally, regarding the protection of victims through provision of appropriate legal and social services, an unresolved question is whether specialized services are necessary for victims of human trafficking or whether the provision of typical services for post-traumatic stress disorder and other general trauma therapies are sufficient to meet the therapeutic needs of victims. In other words, does the harm caused by victimization through human

trafficking constitute a new type of harm, deserving of a specialized therapeutic treatment approach or can the current social services and related therapies adequately help victims recover. The answer to this question has large implications for both therapists and policy makers. Some jurisdictions have determined that victimization through human trafficking requires a distinct approach and therapies while others continue to treat victims of human trafficking similar to victims of domestic abuse or child maltreatment. More research is necessary to answer this important question.

A first step has been taken to criminalize human trafficking and set up agencies to monitor efforts to reduce the treatment and exploitation of human beings as commodities. Future steps need involve social scientists to better understand the phenomenon as it relates to prevention, prosecution of offenders and protection of victims. To raise public awareness of human trafficking, social scientists must first raise their own awareness of the problem. Once they do, they will see that there is much to study to help end this most dehumanizing of crimes.