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Improving Identification, Prevalence Estimation, and Earlier Intervention for Victims of Labor and Sex Trafficking

2019-VT-BX-0037

A Lessons Learned Report

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Introduction

The trafficking of people for forced labor and sexual exploitation remains a key challenge for law enforcement, social service providers, and human rights advocates. An accurate, empirical understanding of the scope and scale of labor and sex trafficking is crucial for decisions about how best to address and prevent trafficking and exploitation. While localized studies, anecdotal evidence, and administrative data on the flow of known cases through criminal justice, social service, and immigration systems indicate a problem of large magnitude, attempts to determine the prevalence of human trafficking have been methodologically limited and have produced widely varying numbers (Farrell & de Vries, 2019; Raphael, 2017). The very nature of human trafficking makes it difficult for researchers to accurately count the extent of victimization, as those who engage in trafficking often isolate victims, and those who escape may be reluctant to seek help or cooperate with police due to trauma and fear (Antonopoulou & Skoufalos, 2006; Farrell et al., 2008; Newton et al., 2008). Research to address fundamental questions about scope and prevalence is growing but important gaps and inconsistencies remain.

To date, prevalence estimates have been too imprecise to provide a reasoned basis for calibrating public investments to combat the problem, or to measure trends for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions. In addition to uncertainty about prevalence, there is no consensus among researchers and government agencies about the proportions of human trafficking survivors who are exploited for labor versus for commercial sex. It is widely assumed that the numbers produced from limited data streams are skewed, over-representing sex trafficking and under-representing labor trafficking (Farrell & de Vries, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) funded the current project in 2020 to improve the field's ability to estimate the size of the domestic labor and sex trafficking population. Unfortunately, given significant delays related to the COVID-19 epidemic that impacted our study plan, the research team was not able to complete the project during the study period.

Below, we review the study's objectives, research questions, and methodology as originally proposed, as well as the revised approach we took post-COVID-19. We then provide a discussion of the challenges we faced in the conduct of this research. Finally, we close with lessons learned and recommendations for the study of labor and sex trafficking estimation specifically, and approaches to addressing human trafficking more broadly.

Project Summary

The goal of the proposed project was to advance knowledge on human trafficking through the production of a replicable and scientifically sound method for measuring trafficking and producing valid prevalence estimates. Specifically, the hidden population estimation (HPE) method uses administrative data from institutions where trafficking victims appear, such as jail systems and providers of social services (e.g., homeless shelters, jail booking facilities, treatment services), to sample individuals (Shively, et al., 2019). The estimation method relies on calculating the probability that people within a county will appear at the places of data collection, allowing us to model the size of the trafficked population relative to the size of the general population. In other words, by using the size of the population observed in the places of

collection, and determining the rate at which the trafficked population shows up in a place of collection, we may estimate the size of the trafficked population in a jurisdiction.

The hidden population estimation approach we proposed was successfully tested in prior research (“The Abt Study;” Shively et al., 2019). The Abt study found that the HPE method was feasible to implement, and yielded sample sizes and response rates supporting scientifically sound prevalence estimation. For example, in one county, 591 interviews were completed in a hospital emergency department, two homeless shelters, and one county jail system’s central booking facility. The data obtained were sufficient to support county-level estimates of both sex and labor trafficking. Using a seven-item screener, they found 7.1% of those surveyed provided responses indicating victimization and labor trafficking was found to be more prevalent than sex trafficking (64% and 36%, respectively).

Main Goals, Objectives, and Research Questions

The objective of the proposed study was to test a methodology for estimating trafficking prevalence that is useful to policymakers and practitioners in local jurisdictions combatting human trafficking, as well as to state and federal policymakers and researchers. Specifically, the proposed methodology was to produce estimates of labor and sex trafficking victimization in local jurisdictions using primary data collection supplemented with administrative data.

In addition to the broad objective of demonstrating the utility of a method, the project aimed answer the following primary research questions:

1. What is the prevalence of sex and labor trafficking victimization within the arrestee population in a given jurisdiction?

2. What is prevalence of sex and labor trafficking victimization within populations seeking or receiving social or treatment services in the same jurisdiction?
3. Where do victims come into contact with services, and can brief screeners be effectively implemented to promote earlier detection and more comprehensive, community level responses”
4. To what extent can the findings from the study sites be modeled and generalized (e.g., what data sources are available and useful to support modeling; what data gaps present obstacles to modeling and extrapolation, and what would it take to fill them?).

Research Design and Methods

Overview. Our original plan was to use a mixed-methods approach to study the prevalence of trafficking victimization, in line with the HPE method. However, we were unable to formalize relationships with key agencies to launch data collection. Here, we provide the research design and methods in hopes that other researchers will find it instructive in the conduct of their own studies on estimating labor and sex trafficking.

As introduced earlier, the HPE method is a two-step process featuring accessing populations containing trafficked persons reliably and systematically in places where they collect, then screening for victimization. The first step is crucial for hidden populations: their covert status means their appearance within commonly-surveyed populations may be unreliable, and the ability of practitioners to “detect” or identify victims within their caseloads is likely to be an undercount without substantial (and as yet, unrealized) investments in training and reporting systems. By sampling in places where trafficking victims are likely to appear, the HPE method avoids some of this bias.

Jail Data Collection. Originally, we proposed to implement data collection with teams of interviewers at each site consisting of professional survey interviewers and a supervisor. After, COVID-19 we needed to amend study procedures (see *Barriers and Challenges* section below). To reduce contact with those in the jail and study staff, we moved to recruitment and data collection via tablet. At the jail facility with which we originally partnered, everyone detained in jail can access programming and entertainment programs via a tablet, with unique log-on information. The jail agreed to add our survey to the tablet software to facilitate data collection.

For this project, we adapted the Abt study screening tool (Shively, et al., 2019) to be administered on a tablet. This seven-item screener asks participants about experiences with forced or coerced work, forced or coerced sex, and service utilization. See Appendices for full English (Appendix A) and Spanish (Appendix) versions of the screener.

Collecting data from people detained and jail presents some challenges worth consideration. People remain in booking facilities for varying lengths of time, so a sample within a facility on any given day will differ in composition from a sample of those who enter facilities during a specific period, because it will over-represent those who stay the longest. The tablet-based survey would have sampled from both the “stock” (those who arrived in the facility prior to data collection) and the “flow” (those who arrive during scheduled data collection). Sampling from both groups is essential, since arrestees in the stock are more likely to have serious charges, while those with minor charges are likely to be observed only in the flow.

All survey data would have been linked to the facility’s administrative data, and post-stratify based upon characteristics to make the sample as representative as possible (using, e.g., total length of stay, demographics, reason for detention).

Social Service Agency Data Collection. There are many many types of service providers for trafficking victims, and the types of service provided, target populations for those services, and availability of overlapping services vary considerably. For example, some state and city agencies are “umbrella” human service providers and coordinators, while others offer targeted services (e.g., substance abuse treatment, victim or homelessness shelters). Some agencies, NGOs, and programs offer multiple services for narrowly defined populations (e.g., homeless youth, addicted women), while others offer narrow sets of services to many populations (e.g., legal services, shelters).

In our proposed study, we proposed sampling at a homeless shelter, an outpatient clinic, and a rape crisis center within the same county as the jail. Unfortunately, we were unable to formalize relationships by the end of the study period (see *Barriers and Challenges* section below).

Proposed Data Analysis: As previously described, we were unable to launch data collection during the study period. Here, we describe the proposed analytic plan had we obtained the requisite data.

Because the HEP method relies on calculating the probability that people within the county will appear at the places of collection, one can model the size of the entire population relative to the size of the general population. By using (*B*) the size of the population observed in the places of collection, and determining (*A*) the rate at which the trafficked population shows up in a place of data collection, one can estimate the size of the trafficked population in a jurisdiction (*K*):

$$K = \frac{B}{A} \quad [1]$$

Although conceptually straightforward, there are important considerations that make estimating K somewhat challenging. The first challenge is that trafficking victims may appear in more than one place of collection, so one must account for potential double-counting. One should also assume that across the places of collection there is likely heterogeneity of the probability that a sampled respondent is a trafficking victim. The proposed data collection strategy (i.e., collecting data in several different types of places) was intended to address this issue. Since both the size of the population utilizing each place of collection and the probability of trafficked victims appearing in those populations are likely different, one must add a subscript j to equation (1) to represent different estimates with respect to place (1a):

$$K_j = \frac{B_j}{A_j} \quad [1a]$$

It should also be expected that some trafficking victims will visit more than one place of data collection, so when estimating the size of the trafficked population, participants who are counted in more than one of the data collection sites must be subtracted (2):

$$K = \sum_j K_j - \sum_{j \neq k} K_{jk} - \sum_{j \neq k \neq l} K_{jkl} - \sum_{j \neq k \neq l \neq m} K_{jklm} \quad [2]$$

The second complication is that one estimates the population B from a sample taken in each place of collection, for a particular time period. For the proposed study, the complete lists of those currently detained in the jail facility or those visiting the social service agencies would have constituted the sample frame. We would have sampled respondents from those lists and weighted the samples to the frame for each place of data collection. When we estimate K , we need to report the number of trafficked persons in an area within a year, so we inflate K_j to reflect a year from the data collection period in which we conducted the survey in that venue.

A third complication is estimating A , the rate of visits to each place of collection, as it varies for each survey respondent. There are two main components to estimating A : the first component is estimating A with respect to measured characteristics such as demographics or other behavior. The second component is modeling the data generation process for visits to places of collection, as an individual's repeated visits to a place of collection are not independent. This matters for estimation – the more closely we model the data generation process, the better estimates we achieve for estimating each individual's A . Once we estimate each individual's A , we compute an average A for each place of collection by taking a weighted average across the individuals.

Barriers and Challenges to Project Completion

The COVID-19 pandemic presented numerous challenges to researchers, among other devastating impacts, and this study was no different. These challenges resulted in study delays, protocol redesigns, and a shortened timeframe, and as a result, the study could not be completed during the study period. Below, we detail the challenges that we faced during the study period that led to its unsuccessful completion.

First, COVID-19 had a significant impact on all human-subjects research. In the early days of the pandemic and for many months that followed, in-person human subjects research was tabled as new protocol, approaches, and policies were developed for studies. Once human subjects research pauses were lifted, investigators needed to develop plans to reduce contact between study participants and study staff, and between study staff themselves.

Second, these human subjects research challenges were especially impactful on the current study. We proposed to collect data in a jail, homeless shelter, outpatient clinic, and rape crisis

center, agencies that may have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 (Franco-Paredes, et al., 2021; Levesque, et al., 2022; Kowalski, et al., 2020). Indeed, because of COVID-19, the study team had to resign the data collection plan, from in-person interviews to tablet-based surveys. This was informed mostly by the jail facility's existing tablet program for people who are detained. Everyone in the jail has a unique log-on and use the tablet to complete their required programming, as well as for entertainment. When logging on, everyone would have received an introduction message with brief explanation of the study. If they elected to continue, they would be directed to a longer study description and consent documents. Those who agreed to participate would then be directed to the brief survey instrument. The benefit of this approach is that everyone in the jail gets introduced to the study and can choose whether to participate in private (reducing the burden on jail administrators to offer space to the study team, as well as reducing the number of contacts between jail staff, study staff, and participants).

This method also introduced new challenges. For example, what would happen if a participant became distressed by participating in the study. Without some level of contact with study staff, they may be vulnerable to negative consequences of their participation and the study team wouldn't be able to address it. To address this potential issue, the tablets would have been programmed so that the survey was only accessible during hours in which mental health services are available to those in jail (i.e., Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Weekends 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.). Further, at the end of the survey, all participants would be given contact information for in-jail services and community-based resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic also significantly affected the formation and formalization of partnership with the agencies that would serve as our data collection sites. In conversations with potential study sites, we learned that COVID-19 presented several challenges to these agencies, including managing illness, staff burnout and turnover, and funding shortages. As a result, the capacity to participate as a study site was limited, or simply not possible. For example, one agency said they were shifting their available resources to youth, and were referring potential *adult* trafficking victims to services outside of the county.

It is also worth noting that the study team was impacted by challenges and staffing changes that were occurring within our key agencies, with little ability to influence these events. We also had to deal with several instances of major shifts within our key agencies. At several points throughout the study period, we would be in contact with an agency that looked like a promising study partner, but due to new administration, changing agency staff, or shifting priorities, participation in the current study was not granted. Most notably, we spent more than two years developing a relationship with a jail facility as our key agency. Unfortunately, the jail administration alerted us prior to launching data collection that they were revamping their approach to programming and needed to pause participation in the study. Given the length of time it took to develop this relationship, we were unable to identify a new jail study partner by the end of the study period.

Lessons Learned

It is unfortunate that this study could not be completed within the study's timeframe, as the HPE method remains a promising approach to estimate systematically the prevalence of labor and sex trafficking. Still, the study team learned several important lessons that should

serve as illuminating for researchers who study human trafficking. These include developing strategic partnerships early; developing contingency plans during proposal development (to include in the proposal); and, advocating and elevating primary prevention of human trafficking.

Develop Strategic Partnerships Early

At the beginning of this project, the study team had contacts with a variety of agencies, researchers, and other experts who work in the field of human trafficking, child sexual abuse, and related areas across the country. However, the HPE method requires that data collection be conducted at sites within the same county/jurisdiction. Much of our effort was focused on introductions, setting up meetings, reviewing project activities and outcomes with key agencies after the project was funded. As described earlier, we were not able to formalize relationships with all key agencies prior to the end of the study period. Although there was interest in participation early on, this interest did not yield completed agreements. When this occurred, additional effort was needed to locate new (potential) partners and repeat the process.

In order for a project like this to run smoothly, these partnerships are best set up as early as possible, if not before the project is funded. Junior scholars who are interested in researching human trafficking victimization, in collaboration with more advanced or senior scholars in the field, would benefit from doing outreach to community partners (within a single jurisdiction) early on to develop these relationships as soon as possible. For example, university departments or research agencies could host informal meet-and-greet sessions with agency leadership to discuss potential avenues of collaboration (prior to calls for proposals).

Developing strategic partnerships early can then lead to agencies serving in more official subcontract awardee positions, which will enhance the mutually-beneficial nature of the relationship and likely yield a stronger commitment to participation. Indeed, such an arrangement could solidify the study as an agency priority, which would then add stability in the face of future changes in agency leadership or agenda.

Develop Contingency Plans During Proposal Development

During the first few days of COVID-19, few of us could have predicted the full effect the pandemic would have on our work and lives. In the months and years that followed, scholars, study teams, universities, and other organizations were scrambling to figure out how to make things work *in the moment*. A second important lesson from this project is to prioritize contingency planning during proposal development. Asking critical questions during this early period is vital for success of the project after it is funded. For example: *If the primary mode of data collection suddenly becomes unavailable, what alternative methods are immediately available? What methods are available but would need more time to develop? If the main data collection site pauses or declines participation unexpectedly, are secondary sites available?*

It is very likely that many research teams have these contingency plans in place already, and that effort should remain. For the current project, our team did not, and the result was a larger hurdle to attempt to clear during an already challenging time. It may be helpful for NIJ (and other funders) to include prompts about contingency plans in solicitation notices in the future, or even more formally, include contingency planning as a required element of applications.

Elevate primary prevention of human trafficking

The final lesson learned from this project is focused on the larger field of human trafficking. As this project progressed over the past several years, the study team had many opportunities to meet with experts on trafficking, agency leadership, task force coordinators, clinicians, social workers, advocates, and advisors who work with children and adults who have experienced human trafficking. Though each has unique experiences with the trafficking victim population (engaging them at various stages and with different aims), a common theme is that there are not enough resources to fully and comprehensively address an issue like human trafficking. This became even more apparent during COVID-19, when financial resources and human capacity became even leaner. There was an overarching sense of limited impact in the work that was done.

These comments align with scholars' calls for more resources and support for the primary prevention of human trafficking (Jaffee et al., 2022; Reid, et al., 2023; Todres & Diaz, 2019). It seems, given current constraints and limited resources, that directing the majority of resources to after-the-fact responses is not sustainable. Instead, local, state, national, and international agencies should rely on the tools of public health to elevate the primary prevention of labor and sex trafficking victimization, as well as trafficking perpetration.

Preventing human trafficking requires several steps, in line with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (n.d.) public health approach to violence prevention. The first step is identifying the scope of labor and sex trafficking. Funding opportunities like NIJ–2019-15231 (under which the current project was funded) are vital for demystifying the nature and scope of human trafficking. More resources and support from a variety of stakeholders are needed here.

Although advancements have been made, this work is challenging and requires more support. The second step is to identify the risk and protective factors related to labor and sex trafficking. This work would include the recognition of the complex interplay between individual traits, relationships, communities, and larger social systems that impact trafficking victimization and perpetration (Jaffee et al., 2022). In the third step, research that explores this interplay can inform the development of programs, policies, and laws that directly address or engage the identified risk and protective factors. Fourth and finally, programs, policies, and laws that demonstrate effectiveness should be disseminated broadly. Prior work in public health has supported this systematic approach, and if governments want to address trafficking, similar efforts should be made.

Conclusion

Identifying the scope of labor and sex trafficking victimization is vital to successfully addressing this phenomenon. Indeed, this type of work is the first step to public health-oriented responses to violence. The question of the size of the labor and sex trafficking victim population has dogged researchers in the past. But work in this space is evolving.

COVID-19 presented substantial challenges for this project—ones that could not be overcome. Despite this, the lessons learned should prove useful for researchers who wish to extend this line of research. By spending considerable effort planning for unexpected events and developing critical partnerships early in the process, researchers will be primed to successfully test the HPE method across the United States. To do so would enhance the field's

ability to estimate labor and sex trafficking victimization and advance the prevention of human trafficking, more broadly.

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Appendix A

Improving Identification, Prevalence Estimation, and Earlier Intervention for Victims of Labor and Sex Trafficking

Brief Trafficking Screener Items (Adapted from Shively et al., 2019):

1.	Have you ever been pressured to do things you didn't want to do to pay back debt? ☐ Yes [f/u: How have you been pressured?] ☐ Through threats ☐ Through violence ☐ Through threats and violence ☐ Other _____ ☐ No
2.	Have you ever been pressured to perform work that was very different from what you were promised? ☐ Yes [f/u: How have you been pressured?] ☐ Through threats ☐ Through violence ☐ Through threats and violence ☐ Other _____ ☐ No
3.	Have you ever been pressured to have sex for things of value? ☐ Yes [f/u: How have you been pressured?] ☐ Through threats ☐ Through violence ☐ Through threats and violence ☐ Other _____ ☐ No
4.	Have you ever you exchanged sex for things of value? ☐ Yes ☐ Were you under the age of 18 or older ☐ Under 18 ☐ 18 or older ☐ No
5.	Have you ever been pressured to do something illegal, for someone else's profit? ☐ Yes [f/u: How have you been pressured?] ☐ Through threats ☐ Through violence ☐ Through threats and violence

	○ Other _____ ○ What happened when you refused to do those illegal acts? ○ I did not refuse ○ Nothing happened ○ I experienced violence ○ I experienced threats of violence ○ Other _____ ○ No
6.	Has a person in a position of authority where you worked ever took your money for things such as transportation, food, or rent? ○ Yes ○ Was it with your permission? ▪ Yes ▪ No ○ No
7.	In the past 12 months, have you had any contact with any of the following (check all that apply): ○ Homeless shelter/temporary housing ○ Emergency department/urgent care clinic ○ Hospital (admitted, overnight) ○ Drug/alcohol treatment program ○ Child/family protective services ○ Legal aid/law clinic ○ Public assistance (e.g., TANF, SNAP, WIC) ○ Victim services (e.g., rape crisis center, DV) ○ Church/faith-based program ○ Reproductive/faith-based program ○ Mental health counselor/therapist ○ Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) ○ Jail/prison ○ Other agencies or services _____

Appendix B

Mejora de la identificación, la estimación de la prevalencia y la intervención temprana para las víctimas de la trata laboral y sexual

1.	¿Alguna vez ha sido presionado para hacer cosas que no quería hacer para pagar una deuda? ☐ Sí [f/u: ¿Cómo te han presionado?] ☐ A través de amenazas ☐ A través de la violencia ☐ A través de amenazas y violencia ☐ Otro _____ ☐ No
2.	¿Alguna vez ha sido presionado para realizar un trabajo muy diferente al que le prometieron? ☐ Sí [f/u: ¿Cómo te han presionado?] ☐ A través de amenazas ☐ A través de la violencia ☐ A través de amenazas y violencia ☐ Otro _____ ☐ No
3.	¿Alguna vez ha sido presionado para tener relaciones sexuales por cosas de valor? ☐ Sí [f/u: ¿Cómo te han presionado?] ☐ A través de amenazas ☐ A través de la violencia ☐ A través de amenazas y violencia ☐ Otro _____ ☐ No
4.	¿Alguna vez ha cambiado el sexo por cosas de valor? ☐ Sí ☐ ¿Era menor de 18 años o mayor? ☐ menor de 18 años ☐ 18 años o más ☐ No
5.	¿Alguna vez ha sido presionado para hacer algo ilegal, en beneficio de otra persona? ☐ Sí [f/u: ¿Cómo te han presionado?] ☐ A través de amenazas ☐ A través de la violencia ☐ A través de amenazas y violencia ☐ Otro _____ ☐ ¿Qué sucedió cuando se negó a realizar esos actos ilegales?

	☐ No me negué ☐ No pasó nada ☐ Experimenté violencia ☐ Experimenté amenazas de violencia ☐ Otro _____
	☐ No
6.	¿Alguna persona en una posición de autoridad en el lugar donde trabajó alguna vez tomó su dinero para cosas como transporte, comida o alquiler? ☐ Sí ☐ ¿Fue con su permiso? ☐ Sí ☐ No ☐ No
7.	En los últimos 12 meses, ¿ha tenido algún contacto con alguno de los siguientes (marque todo lo que corresponda): ☐ Refugio para personas sin hogar / vivienda temporal ☐ Departamento de emergencias / clínica de atención de urgencia ☐ Hospital (ingresado, nocturno) ☐ Programa de tratamiento de drogas / alcohol ☐ Servicios de protección infantil / familiar ☐ Asistencia jurídica / clínica jurídica ☐ Asistencia pública (por ejemplo, TANF, SNAP, WIC) ☐ Servicios para víctimas (por ejemplo, centro de crisis por violación, violencia doméstica) ☐ Programa religioso / basado en la fe ☐ Programa reproductivo / basado en la fe ☐ Consejero / terapeuta de salud mental ☐ Servicio de Inmigración y Control de Aduanas (ICE) ☐ Cárcel / prisión ☐ Otras agencias o servicios _____