



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

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A Lessons Learned Report

Principal Investigator	Ryan T. Shields, Ph.D. Associate Professor 113 Wilder Street, Room 445, Lowell, MA 01854 P: 978-934-4335 E: Ryan_Shields@uml.edu
Recipient Organization	University of Massachusetts Lowell 1 University Avenue, Lowell, MA 01854
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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.

