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## Human Trafficking of Latino Immigrants: Our Responsibility as Social Workers

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### **Abstract**

This paper is designed for helping professionals who work with Latino families and are concerned about human trafficking of Latino children. The prevalence of trafficking in the United States, specifically trafficking of Latino immigrant and resident children involved in commercial sex trafficking, will be reviewed as well as best practice behaviors related to cultural competence for working with trafficked persons. This topic is important because Latino children trying to come into the United States may fall victim to human trafficking. Arriving in Mexico from South and Central America, an untold number of children and adults are then illegally smuggled into the United States. This process of trafficking individuals across the border occurs daily without adequate intervention from the government on either side of the border. It is important for helping professionals in the Midwest and across the US to understand the risks Latino children and families face as these professionals increasingly work with this rapidly growing population.

*Keywords:* human trafficking, Latina/o youth, prevention, social work

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## Introduction

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The demand for using children in the commercial sex trafficking industry is fueled by a demand for prostitution and pornography (Langberg, 2005). Children may be abducted and placed into the trade or they may fall victim to human traffickers due to a vulnerable status and a possible history of physical and sexual abuse or other external factors such as hunger and economic necessity. Even undocumented Latino children living in the United States who are not victims of human trafficking, or who have not crossed the border alone, are at risk of childhood sexual abuse and other trauma related to immigration and separation from their families. If we know that children who have run away from home are primary targets for sex trafficking recruiters due to their vulnerability, we can safely assume that children and women belonging to a minority group who are classified as immigrants and undocumented would be targets as well. Obtaining information on sex trafficking is very difficult due to the nature of the crime and the sensitivity of the topic.

## Review of the Literature on Human Trafficking

The United States is considered to be one of the top four countries leading the commercial sex markets with astronomical profits that support the growing industry of selling trafficked persons for sex (Kotrla, 2010). Although obtaining actual statistics of domestic trafficking victims is very difficult due to various factors, the U.S. Department of State estimates that 15,000-50,000 people are trafficked to the United States every year, making it one of the most sought-out locations for individuals being trafficked (Jordan, Patel & Rapp, 2013). Human trafficking is the second most profitable illegal industry in the world and many experts believe it will far exceed drug and arms trafficking within the next 10 years.

It is estimated that at any given time, approximately 10,000 individuals are being trafficked across the United States (Jordan et al., 2013). These numbers only portray a small fraction of what researchers can detect due to victims being misidentified, mislabeled, never reported missing, disappearing indefinitely, or simply not revealing that they are in fact a victim of sex trafficking. The methodical challenges of getting accurate numbers of trafficked victims is detailed in a report put out by the Task Force on Trafficking of Women and Girls (2014). The Task Force reports that human trafficking is extremely difficult to measure and that the victims are difficult to identify. It is most useful to identify a sex trafficking victim at the time they are first trafficked or when they are out in the community actively engaging in sex acts.

According to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC), in 2015 they received a total of 24,757 "signals" of possible trafficking nationwide. For instance, Iowa received 146 phone calls and was ranked the 30th highest call volume of all 50 states in 2015. From the 146 calls received in Iowa, 29.5% were from community members and 17.1% were reported by trafficking victims. Sex trafficking was named the number one type of trafficking in 72.2% of these cases reported, others included labor trafficking. The reported victim demographics from the national calls are as follows: 76.9% were adults, 23.1% minors, 88.5% females, 11.5% males, 26.9% were U.S. permanent residents, and 23.1% were foreign nationals.

In the United States the demand for sex with minors remains high and is primarily sought out by white males whom are married with children (Jordan et al., 2013). These men are seeking young children; especially virgins because of the lessened chances of contracting diseases such as HIV/AIDS from them. Buyers of sex trafficked minors include a variety of people such as military personnel, truck drivers, tourists, and conventioners (Williamson & Prior, 2009). The buyers can be placed into three main categories: situational buyers, preferential buyers, and opportunistic buyers (Jordan et al., 2013). Situational buyers are interested in purchasing sexual acts on the basis of availability and are likely to only purchase a sex act with a minor if the situation presents itself. Preferential buyers are often times pedophiles that have a specific preference based on age and/or gender. Opportunistic buyers have no preference and are usually willing to purchase anything they are able to get and are seeking out the opportunity to engage in a sex act with a minor.

The high demand for sex with an individual through the commercial sex trade is met by a supply of women and minors that is created by traffickers who are seeking profit through the exploitation of others. The term recruitment is used when discussing the process of creating the supply with operations often set up both internationally and in the United States. Recruitment countries are places where individuals are abducted or recruited into the sex trade in order to be sold and then distributed to the destination countries, such as the United States. Within the U.S. victims are transported to cities all over the country but smaller cities in the Midwest can also be used as recruitment sites due in large part to easy access to highways and waterways (Williamson & Prior, 2009). Easy access to adult sex markets such as strip clubs and adult shops within communities provide opportunities for traffickers to exploit their victims. The most commonly used recruitment technique is known as “finesse pimping” which involves crafty manipulation of vulnerable individuals who seemingly decide to willingly go along with selling sexual services. Traffickers using this technique will appeal to a minor who is particularly vulnerable due to their circumstances, such as being homeless

because they ran away from home. The recruiter will make promises of a better life, food, shelter, work, and personal hygiene products if they go with them; this is commonly referred to as “bait and switch.” Enticing victims by playing off of their emotions and their physical needs gives individuals a sense that they will be well taken care of, and often times these promises are coming from someone they know or someone who is the same age.

Women and children are the most sex trafficked in the United States, 70% are women and 50% are children (Jordan et al., 2013). Children are amongst the most vulnerable with the average age of entering into sex trafficking being between 12 to 14 for girls and 11 to 13 for boys and transgender individuals. A trafficker is most attracted to the appearance of vulnerability, and therefore will target children who have run away from home or have been kicked out, also known as “throw away” youth. Shared Hope International (as cited in Kotrla, 2010) estimates that between 450,000 and 2.8 million children run away or are thrown away every year in the United States, most having had experienced neglect and abuse which forced them to make the choice to leave. Some reports suggest that 293,000 children are at risk of becoming sex trafficking victims each year and will be targeted within 48 hours of leaving their homes or being kicked out (Jordan et al., 2013). Other relevant characteristics of individuals who are most commonly trafficked are people of a lower socioeconomic class, lower levels of education, medically and nutritionally deprived, possibly involved with criminal or deviant behavior, and using drugs (Williams & Prior, 2009). All of these factors contribute to a child being vulnerable, which in turn makes them an easy target to be preyed upon. Jordan et al. (2013) reports that having a history of chronic physical, emotional, or sexual abuse adds to a victim’s vulnerability. Over half of the girls who have been trafficked have disclosed that they had been sexually abused by someone outside of their family and 30% of the girls had been sexually abused by someone within their family (Williamson & Prior, 2009).

## Trafficking of Latino Immigrants

This is a difficult topic to research because we do not know how many children even cross the border, much less how many undocumented children are trafficked at the border, or how many Latinos already living in the U.S. are trafficked. Trafficking and sexual abuse can be considered invisible because it is a taboo topic within many traditional Latino families and is, therefore, not openly discussed. Unlike physical abuse, which may be identified by marks such as bruises or burns, sexual abuse of children is difficult to identify unless children disclose the abuse to another person who is in a position to help them. Children face many barriers when reporting sexual abuse, but there are also unique barriers that affect the ability of children in undocumented populations to report the abuse. Language may be the first and most critical barrier for those in need of child protection services. Additional obstacles to reporting abuse include social and cultural barriers, a limited understanding and fear of the legal system, and limited access to public facilities where reporting may take place, such as medical facilities and schools.

Undocumented immigrants are vulnerable and thus more likely to be at risk for trafficking. There is limited information on the exact numbers of undocumented immigrants who are trafficked and the numbers that are available are mostly due to law enforcement, victim self-disclosure, and community members but even then we do not know if these incidences reflect persons of undocumented status. Although we are unable to get exact numbers of cases that are taking place, we do know of some examples of what trafficking has looked like. For instance a detailed analysis of national newspaper articles revealed a trafficking ring involving undocumented immigrants and according to the Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs (2010), four men in Atlanta were arrested and charged with participating in a sex trafficking organization targeting young Mexican women. Of these four men, two were from Mexico, one was from Georgia, and one was from Guatemala. These men preyed on young

women in Mexico promising the victims better lives in America if they would come with them, and once they were brought to the United States, they were immediately taken into the sex trafficking business. Another similar story out of Texas in 2014 involved four women that were charged with operating a sex trafficking ring with minors from Mexico that were in the United States illegally (Associated Press, 2014). In 2015, nine people were indicted on sex trafficking charges in Panama City, Florida (News Herald, 2015). The individuals arrested in this ring originated from Mexico and Honduras and were transporting undocumented women and children from their countries to Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana to be sold for sex and then transferring money back to their home countries.

## Our Responsibility as Social Workers

Helping undocumented immigrants obtain child protection services is complicated, especially when the risks of accessing services (such as shame and a fear of deportation) may outweigh the benefits for some families seeking services. In the United States, child welfare services, including foster care and protective services are available to all children regardless of their immigration status (Jean-Baptiste, 2009). However, there is a great amount of confusion on the part of practitioners on how exactly to assist undocumented immigrant children and no known research on the topic of practitioner response to the unique circumstance of mental health treatment for an undocumented victim of sexual abuse and trafficking. As the undocumented immigrant population and the Latino population in general continues to increase, there will inevitably be an increased demand for competent helping professionals to work with children and adolescents who have experienced trafficking.

Practitioners in agencies and private practice settings should strive for cultural competence when working with this population. Especially the topic of human trafficking can be a sensitive area to work in when a practitioner is also struggling to grasp a cultural understanding of the population that they

are serving. According to Dettlaff & Cardoso (2010), becoming a culturally competent practitioner requires more than understanding the basics of Latino culture. Cultural competent practice is something that develops over time and is increased through experience with a culture and understanding a whole host of complex issues, such as immigration law, risk of deportation, cultural norms and values, family structure, language, history of violence, and experiences with acculturation within each family system. There are a number of best-practice behaviors, stemming from core values of cultural competence, trust, and strengths perspective that one can implement while working with undocumented Latino immigrants who have been victims of traffickers. Furman & Negi (2010) write about best practice behaviors with Latinos and utilize a strengths based perspective whenever working with Latino families regardless of identified obstacle or treatment goal. Cultural competence and using strength's based perspective begins with the assessment of the Latino family member or trafficking victim and continues through the entire professional relationship. When working with Latinos it is important to recognize the cultural values of

the particular family members as well as any racial/ethnic discrimination issues and the family's reaction to sexual abuse and coercion in context of practice (Zayas, Torres & Kyriakakis, 2010).

There is a significant gap in the literature on the topic of human trafficking among undocumented children and, therefore, we know little about how to best serve this population. The topic of undocumented Latino immigrants and human trafficking are very difficult topics to research because we do not know how many children even cross the border illegally each day, much less how many are abducted into the trade. It is important that social work practitioners recognize the risk of trafficking among the undocumented families they serve and are able to connect families with protection and resources without the fear of deportation or consequences to the victims involved. Human trafficking among undocumented Latino immigrants continues to be an important issue that deserves more attention and resources in order to prevent the spread of this crime in Midwest communities and throughout the United States as a whole.

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