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Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking Among Minors in Michigan

Grand Valley State University

Lindsey Upchurch

Abstract

This research paper explores the need for comprehensive prevention methods related to the issue of sexual exploitation and trafficking of minors in the state of Michigan. Scholarly work conducted by the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2013) supports that, overall, there is an inadequate amount of empirical data concerning this issue. Inadequate empirical evidence consequently results in a lack of overall success in preventing sex trafficking among minors. In addition, a report from the Michigan Commission on Human Trafficking (2013) also identifies this problem, while offering alternative ideas surrounding prevention, through collaborative efforts. A human-rights based approach to prevention is also analyzed, based on Duger (2015). Underlying issues of childhood poverty and abuse in Michigan are addressed, in order to understand the importance of an integrated solution to the prevention of sex trafficking among minors. Lastly, a design-thinking method was used to prototype possible solutions, concluding that a high school peer support group, facilitated by staff, would be an effective solution in preventing the exploitation of minors.

Today an inconceivable human rights violation is taking place for thousands across the world. Child sexual exploitation and sex trafficking is effecting countless individuals, both domestically and abroad. It is predicted that, “Human trafficking and sexual exploitation and forced labor is believed to be one of the fastest growing areas of criminal activity” (Gozdziak and MacDonnell, 2007). This injustice is not just impacting developing nations, but it is also an imminent threat to minors domestically. As defined by the Michigan Department of Human Services - Child Protective Services (CPS) Human Trafficking of Children Protocol, “...a victim of child sex trafficking is defined as a minor who has been recruited, enticed, harbored, transported, obtained, or maintained to engage in sexual activity, a sexually explicit performance, or the production of pornography” (Michigan Commission on Human Trafficking, 2013). While significant improvements have taken place regarding sexual exploitation and trafficking intervention through government legislation, the overall prevention of this abuse remains a challenge in our state. The prevention of sexual exploitation and trafficking of minors in Michigan requires a comprehensive, human rights-based approach. Sexual exploitation and trafficking among minors is a human rights abuse and it requires the joint efforts of nonprofit and government agencies throughout the state of Michigan.

When considering what preventative methods are in place regarding sex trafficking amongst minors in Michigan, its pervasiveness and scope must first be examined. In order to identify the prevalence of child commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking, an analysis of available empirical evidence is critical. However in attempting to analyze its prevalence in the state of Michigan and the United States, several challenges were apparent. While studying multiple scholarly journals and government and nongovernmental websites regarding trafficking amongst minors, data reporting the number of minors who were at-risk or actual victims was

either lacking or inconsistent. There was, however, one common statistic frequently referenced from an article published by Estes and Weiner in 2002. A report done by the Crimes Against Children Research Center examined this study, which claims that “about 326,000 children were ‘at risk’ for commercial sexual exploitation” (Stransky and Finkelhor, 2008). A report issued by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC) addressed the limitations of Estes and Weiner’s study, despite it being “the most widely cited nation-level estimates of commercial sexual exploitation of minors” (2013). Despite its frequent reference, its limitations include its inability to accurately account individuals who are at risk in multiple categories, i.e. (homelessness, lesbian, gay, transgender, victim of sexual abuse, etc.).

Due to the difficulty in obtaining accurate research regarding the scope of trafficking and exploitation, the most vulnerable population (minors) continues to go unidentified. Overall, research regarding sexual exploitation and trafficking of minors is significantly underdeveloped and inconsistent (IOM and NRC, 2013). Inconsistent research surrounding the prevalence of sexual exploitation and trafficking of minors inherently results in ineffective prevention at a state and national level. In a report released in 2013, the Michigan Commission of Human Trafficking acknowledged that,

Quantifying human trafficking in Michigan is difficult due to lack of uniform data reporting and the nature of the crime itself. But we do know that it continues to be a growing problem in our state. In a recent survey, the state’s domestic violence and sexual assault programs, together with the programs focused solely on human trafficking, reported serving over 300 known human trafficking cases in the past two years. Most experts believe that this figure is on the low end and that there are likely many more trafficking victims in Michigan. (2013)

In response to the issue of research, the Commission conducted a comprehensive strategy to improve prevention and intervention methods throughout the state. Based on the difficulty to obtain data, the report issued by the Michigan Commission of Human Trafficking suggested: implementing a standard, comprehensive method for capturing and storing human trafficking data; grant the data reporting entity authority to enter data sharing agreements; continue surveying Michigan-based service providers; survey federal, state, and local law enforcement entities; survey family court referees; and encourage research in colleges and universities concerning human trafficking (2013). These proposed solutions appear insightful and manageable in regard to improving data collection.

Another key element in the prevention of sexual exploitation and trafficking of minors, beyond identification, is raising public awareness. Public awareness surrounding this issue is critical, and it must be a collaborative effort between the public and private sectors. Awareness among government leaders, health care professionals, nonprofit leaders, educators, social workers, etc. will ensure that children who are most vulnerable to victimization can be identified and protected. The advocacy of countless organizations throughout the state aid in the prevention of exploitation and trafficking victims. While various public awareness strategies exist, the Michigan Commission on Human Trafficking's report found that the need to foster collaboration among nongovernmental and government agencies was necessary (2013). Several suggestions were given concerning raising public awareness to aid in prevention in the report, including: creating a citizen's guide; implementing a statewide public awareness campaign; collaborative public service announcements and training events; increase public awareness outreach efforts at special events; etc. (Michigan Commission on Human Trafficking, 2013). In respect to improving prevention, each of these suggestions are viable and necessary.

Collaboration at a local and state level is imperative in order to aid in preventing and exposing sexual exploitation and trafficking. While identification and public awareness are critical, prevention must also target issues that increase vulnerability among minors to exploitation and trafficking. Angela Duger writes,

Greater awareness, more funding support to prevent CSEC, and critical legal reform have positively changed the CSEC landscape in the past decade. However, the multitude of programs and frameworks now being employed to combat CSEC appear to be addressing the symptoms of CSEC rather than the underlying causes. (2015)

Duger's report critiques the current approach to combat the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), in a few ways. Based on her critique, she concludes that anti-trafficking requires a holistic approach that is human-rights based. It must focus on the economic and social rights of at-risk children in order to effectively implement prevention strategies, including access to health care and education (Duger, 2015). By failing to discuss and address the underlying issues, effective prevention and intervention is hindered. In fact, "A small number of prominent CSEC advocates in the U.S. have identified the structural and systemic causes of CSEC and recognize that these are issues of inequality and poverty" (Duger, 2015). At the root of child sexual exploitation and trafficking are greater issues of poverty, abuse/neglect, lack of health care, education, etc. Based on this conclusion, it is essential then to examine these factors among minors in the state of Michigan as part of a greater preventative strategy.

Issues of childhood poverty, abuse, and inequality are important to examine when considering prevention of child sexual exploitation and trafficking. In an attempt to view anti-trafficking efforts more holistically, poverty and inequality among children in Michigan is critical. A data report from the National Center for Children in Poverty showed that nearly one

in every four children is living in a family whose income is below the poverty level in Michigan (2015). This means they are living in a family whose income is below the federal poverty threshold of \$18,000 for a single-parent household or \$23,600 a two-parent family of four. The study also indicated that African-American children are five times more likely to live in a household below the poverty threshold, and three times more likely than a white child. Overall more than half a million children are living in poverty (Zehnder-Merrell, 2015). In respect to income inequality, it can also be linked to poorer educational success rates among children. In Michigan, one out of four students will not graduate on time (Zehnder-Merrell, 2015). Child abuse and neglect rates are also instrumental in understanding determinants of sexual exploitation and trafficking. The study also discovered that child abuse and neglect cases increased 31 percent between 2006 and 2013 (Zehnder-Merrell, 2015). These statistics are extremely alarming and must be strongly considered when considering prevention methods. Based on these significant findings on the rate of poverty and abuse among children, is it clear that other rights-based factors have a tremendous impact on increasing the vulnerability of minors to sexual exploitation and trafficking. Addressing these underlying factors may be the next step in a more holistic strategy to prevent trafficking among minors in Michigan.

The scope and severity of sex trafficking and exploitation of minors is seemingly unknown. But despite the lack of concrete evidence, it is still an imminent threat to the well-being of minors across the world. The prevention of sexual exploitation and trafficking of minors in Michigan requires a comprehensive, human rights-based approach. With the infringement against minors' human rights, an effective solution requires the joint efforts of nonprofit and government agencies throughout the state of Michigan. Ultimately, the examination of governmental and nongovernmental efforts is critical in order to arrive at an integrated solution

that both addresses the individual and the existing systems of inequality which place children more at risk to be exploited.

Prototyping a Solution: Meet Angela

In using a design-thinking model and based on the presented research, a persona was created in order to prototype and test various solutions to preventing sex trafficking among minors. The persona created is a 17 year old female named Angela. Angela recently ran away from her foster home. She has experienced more than her share of hardships, moving from foster home to foster home throughout most of her adolescence. At Angela's previous foster home, she was abused, and decided her best option would be to escape her situation. Angela has very little money and almost no support network. Although she attempts to stay with friends, she often finds herself on the streets, looking for food, shelter, and a source of income. Thankfully Angela is still attempting to attend school. But her future looks grim as she attempts to survive and get her basic needs met. Unfortunately, her difficult circumstances have increased her risk for sexual exploitation, or "sex for survival", and ultimately, trafficking. What options does she have? What solutions will offer Angela hope, security, and success? The next step in solving this issue was to create two prototype solutions, test each, and then find a final solution that would best help Angela.

First Prototype

The premise of the first prototype focused on prevention of trafficking through a school-based mentorship program. The prototype includes the implementation of a mentoring program by school administrators. School-based mentorship is particularly effective because of the consistency in relationship that it would provide youth seeking it. Consistent relationships would foster emotional and social development, particularly when teachers serve as students' mentors.

There are several benefits in taking a community-based approach to mentoring at-risk youth. In a recent study examining school-based mentors, the authors noted that, “If teachers are also mentors, schools can more easily organize pre-matching activities at the beginning of the school year and avoid short term matches or premature termination of SBM relationships” (Simoes and Alarcao, 2013). The healthy development of adult-youth relationships is critical, especially for a minor who has experienced abuse, neglect, trauma, homelessness, etc.

This prototype specifies a school-based approach with the goal that teachers who are one of the largest touch-points for minors would advocate more distinctly as a mentor. A qualitative study using a focus group method, included 22 teachers who chose to participate in a school-based mentoring program. Several focus groups took place, and the results included a variation of feedback from the mentors. Some of the positive outcomes the teachers mentioned about the school-based mentoring program was innovative organization among school administrators and teachers, collaborating among teachers to meet mentoring goals, etc. (Simoes and Alarcao, 2013). However, despite the novel concept of running a school-based mentoring program, there are a number of possible barriers to the program’s effectiveness. Some identified barriers mentioned by the teachers included the absence of parental involvement, lack of cooperation among community stakeholders (i.e. social services), inadequate time, etc. (Simoes and Alarcao, 2013). Ultimately, there are several positive and negative outcomes when considering a school-based program, but it remains a viable solution in terms of a preventative strategy concerning youth and sexual exploitation.

Prior to testing this prototype also posed the question of comparing a volunteer based program versus a program that offered incentive to staff who chose to mentor. While it would initially be a volunteer program, the possibility of pursuing grants or slight incentives may need

to be considered in order to compensate skilled, passionate teachers for their commitment to mentoring their students in a highly focused way. This school-based program would involve teacher volunteers who would make a one-year commitment to a student. Ideally, if the program was successful in its first year the long-term goal would be a four-year commitment made by teachers so that high school students would form stronger relationships during their time in high school. In order to qualify for the mentoring program, administrators would need to evaluate students' family history, income, any involvement with Child Protective Services, foster care, etc. This criteria is meant to target students whose history reflects some risk or vulnerability to trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Ultimately, this program's goal is to build meaningful, trust-based relationships between students and teachers in an effort to equip students with relational and professional skills. Relational development will take place in the context of weekly mentoring meetings between the student and teacher.

To test this prototype I improvised as a school administrator interviewing a high school health and physical education teacher. This teacher has nearly 30 years of experience in a high school and offered invaluable feedback. I asked her five questions concerning her interest in the program, what strengths and weaknesses she perceived, if compensation was necessary, and ultimately how effective it would be. Based on her response she concluded that the program would be a great asset to the school and teens who have grown up in the foster care system. She expressed that most faculty would most likely be willing to mentor without any compensation and solely as volunteers. Although she agreed with the main goal in providing support for teens, she suggested the possibility of a peer-support group that was facilitated by faculty. This would alleviate the emotional pressure and stress of a one-on-one dynamic between faculty and students, and shift the solution toward a community-based approach. Overall the testing phase

was successful in gaining a better understanding of how this program could actually prevent trafficking of minors, especially by broadening its approach in reaching students through faculty and peers.

Second Prototype

The second proposed prototype is a mentoring program that focuses solely on professional development. This program's existence is based on the understanding that one of the greatest techniques traffickers use is to deceive minors into thinking they can earn money or find a job by working for them. This deception may begin with gifts like money and clothes, which traffickers use to lure young, vulnerable individuals who are looking for potential employment. This is particularly a threat among homeless or runaway minors who may have no family support. Often times the promise of a job can be one of the fastest ways to lure a minor into prostitution. With these potential threats in mind, an education and professional development mentoring relationship would serve to equip at-risk youth with tangible skills coupled with knowledge to expose them to higher education and job opportunities in a concentrated way. In the wake of tremendous social and economic pressures, professional development and the prospect of higher education may seem out of reach for some. But this mentoring program would provide a concentrated opportunity for students' success.

The program would involve several professionals from the local community who would meet with youth twice a month in order to discuss various career paths, develop relational skills, and help youth to set goals for their career path. The program would provide several hands-on experiences for youth to discover their personal talents and focus on the development of professional skills. Volunteer experiences would also be included, involving the companies and organizations that are represented by the professional mentors. This program would require the

collaboration of teachers, school administrators, and counselors in order to help facilitate its implementation. Professionals would be expected to have experience working with youth, particularly those at-risk, and meet the necessary background checks in order to work with the youth using the program.

When testing this prototype I improvised as a school faculty member simply discussing the dynamics of a program to a business professional. The goal of this test was to gain insight in how the professional perceived the program based on their personal interest, as well as their opinion of its strengths and weaknesses. Although the professional mentioned their interest in participating, they were a bit reluctant concerning its actual ability to prevent youth from being exploited. They raised concerns about the need for the students to have a supportive family that would actually help them implement the skills that this program would offer, like finding and securing a job. Despite the program's weaknesses, the professional did note that businesses might be particularly interested in partnering with schools on the basis of gaining public recognition and notoriety. In addition, students' ability to gain exposure to careers was also noted as extremely important and fundamental in order to help them recognize alternative paths that their life might take. This test concluded with more negative feedback than positive, but still served to be incredibly helpful in finding a final solution.

Final Solution

Sex trafficking among minors in the state of Michigan is a pervasive issue. Research suggests that the scope of the issue is allusive, but factors that increase a minor's vulnerability are somewhat identifiable. Inadequate education, child abuse and neglect, poverty, and homelessness are just a few of the factors that endanger minors to be sexually exploited. Based on the findings in this report, two prototypes were proposed and tested. In an effort to increase

prevention of trafficking and exploitation among minors, this solution integrates multiple spheres of society in order to produce an effective strategy to keep minors safe. The goal of this prototype is to provide minors who face grim circumstances with the opportunity to overcome their circumstances that have increased their vulnerability.

The prototyping phase of this project revealed that a teen support group, facilitated by a high school faculty member, is an effective solution to preventing trafficking among minors. This solution empowers those who have been victimized or deemed “at-risk” to individuals who have a voice. Minors who are most at-risk for trafficking find a place of refuge and comfort by interacting in a teen support group at their local high school. The goal of this solution is that students who face similar challenges might empathize with one another, as well as encourage one another to fight against their odds. This support group would be facilitated with a faculty, but would be led mostly by the teens participating in it. Faculty members might suggest discussion topics or exercises, but would mostly facilitate. And an advantage to this solution is that it could be replicated throughout school systems and districts, based on its effectiveness in empowering youth who have been in or are transitioning out of foster care. The idea is that every person’s story matters, and every person has a voice. With this in mind, a peer support group might exceed expectations in providing tangible support to minors by building comradery and presenting alternative solutions.

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