**Research Recap**

**Abortion Among Minor Victims of Sexual**

**Abuse and Sex Trafficking**

Acts of sexual abuse and sex trafficking against minors are widespread in the U.S. with devastating consequences. The egregious acts rob them of their most basic and essential needs for security and safety and launch a life trajectory marked by severe, often life-long suffering.

Pregnancies among sexually exploited youth frequently end in abortion and are often the result of coercion by the perpetrators. As such, abortion does not offer an escape for sexual abuse and trafficking victims but instead operates as a tool by abusers to maintain control and continue criminal activity.

Easing standards for access to abortion among minors is likely to make abuse even harder to detect and stop. The hidden nature of the crimes combined with ignorance, apathy, and complicit behavior by abortion providers reveal an urgent need to intervene with this highly traumatized, vulnerable, and likely growing segment of our population.

**Scope of the Problem of Sexual Exploitation of Minors**

* In an extensive review of published studies, Townsend and Rheingold (2013) reported the prevalence of child sexual abuse for girls under age 18 in the U.S. is between 11% and 17%.
* Other national studies have revealed 5% to 25% of adults report childhood sexual abuse, depending on the segment of the population studied and the definitions of sexual abuse employed.
* Child sexual abuse by family members is widespread.
* Approximately one-third of child sexual abuse is committed by family members.
* Approximately 90% of victims know their abuser.
* Of the family cases, fathers and step-fathers are the most common type of relative.
* On average, victims of child sexual abuse by relatives experience greater negative consequences compared to victims of sexual abuse committed by nonrelatives.

Sexual abuse is a social ill of epidemic proportions, affecting children of all ages, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined childhood sexual abuse as the, *“involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend and is unable to give informed consent to.”*

Sexual abuse has also been defined in the professional literature as *“any sexual conduct or contact of an adult or significantly older child with or upon a child for the purposes of the sexual gratification of the perpetrator.”*

**Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Defined:** Domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) is defined as the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of U.S. minors for the purposes of a commercial sex act (Trafficking Victims Protection Act). This includes a person’s exchange or acceptance of sex acts to meet basic needs such as for food and shelter, also termed survival sex or the giving or receiving of anything of value (e.g. money, clothing, shelter) or the commercial elements are what differentiates DMST from other forms of sexual exploitation, such as sexual assault or rape.

**How widespread is Sex Trafficking of Minors?**

* Cases of sex trafficking have been identified in all 50 states using arrest records, with available data indicating trafficking is thriving in every region, state, and community within the United States.
* One study revealed that over 60% of identified human trafficking cases in the U.S. involve citizens, and nearly one-third (32%) are minors (Kyckelhahn, Beck, & Cohen, 2009).
* The majority of female sex trafficking victims in the U.S are recruited between the ages of 12 and 14.
* The most widely cited statistics suggest that 300,000–400,000 children are at risk or become victims of sex trafficking in the U.S. each year.
* However, many believe more accurate numbers are in the millions and the cited figures are likely underestimated due to study limitations and many other factors.

**Emotional and Physical Damage to Sexually Exploited Minors**

* Child sexual abuse is associated with a wide range of emotional and physical health adversities.
* Martin, et al. (2004) reported that the incidence of psychiatric diagnoses occurring over a lifetime is 56% for women who have disclosed a history of child sexual abuse.
* Increased risks for depression, suicidal ideation and behaviors, substance abuse, and PTSD have been consistently associated with sexual abuse exposure.

**Psychological Damage to Sexually Exploited Minors…Focus on Sexual Abuse**

Borderline Personality Disorder, Dissociative Identity Disorder, and eating disorders are more common with child sexual abuse, as are pain disorders.

A history of sexual abuse also places a child at increased risk for sexual re-victimization in adolescence and adulthood, especially among females.

**Childhood Abuse Histories Common Among Victims of Sex Trafficking**

* Several studies have demonstrated high rates of sexual abuse (90-95%) prior to sex trafficking exploitation.
* Cole (2018) reported that minors who are exploited in commercial sex often have histories of neglect and abuse, highly conflicted relationships with family, and unstable home environments.
* Youth who are trafficked typically struggle with various physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms associated with complex trauma, involving a chronic state of vigilance and perception of adults as sources of threat rather than of comfort or support.
* These young people may experience difficulties in a range of domains, including attachment, behavioral self-control, self-concept, and emotional regulation, among others.

**Psychological Damage to Sexually Exploited Minors…Focus on Trafficking**

The most common mental health conditions include substance use disorders, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression and suicidality, and anxiety.

**Adverse mental health consequences:** damaged sense of self, shame, severe stigma, hopelessness, compromised interpersonal boundaries, distrust of others, anxiety disorders, pathologic fear, panic attacks, sleep disturbances, depression, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, and dissociative disorders.

**Lederer and Wetzel (2014) Study of Over 100 Domestic Sex Trafficking Victims and Survivors**

* On average, the respondents reported being used for sex by approximately 13 buyers per day. Some respondents reported typical days of as many as 30-50 buyers.
* The authors addressed the devastating consequences of trafficking, demonstrating injuries, illnesses, and impairments often continue for decades.
* They noted the healthcare system is failing trafficked victims, health care providers of all kinds are seeing trafficking victims, but failing to identify them, effectively enabling the criminal behavior and exacerbating the profoundly disabling problems victims incur.

**Lederer and Wetzel (2014) Study**

The most frequently reported psychological problems were depression (89%), anxiety (76%), nightmares (74%), flashbacks (68%), low self-esteem (81%), and feelings of shame or guilt (82%). A substantial number of survivors suffered from other psychological disorders, including Acute Stress (39%), Bipolar (30%), Depersonalization (20%), Multiple Personality (13%), and Borderline Personality (13%) Disorders.

Alarmingly, 41% had attempted suicide (one victim reported 9 attempts) and 55% suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Escape from trafficking was far from a remedy for the psychological suffering of survivors. After trafficking, 96% of survivors reported at least one psychological symptom with an average of 10.5 symptoms across the sample.

The authors commented that the *“picture painted by these surveys and the personal interviews that accompanied many of them is one of complete mental devastation.*”

Many survivors were dependent on drugs or alcohol while they were trafficked, either because the substances were forced (28%) on them as a means of control or because substances operated as a form of coping.

* The vast majority (84%) used alcohol, drugs, or both during trafficking.
* More than a quarter of the respondents reported injecting drugs (27%) and experiencing overdoses (26%).
* Alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine were the most common substances (used by over 50%).

**Pregnancy Among Victimized Youth**

* Studies indicate as many as 50% to 66% of pregnant adolescents have a history of childhood sexual or physical abuse (AGI, 1994; Sexuality Information, 1995; Klein, 2005).
* In a comprehensive meta-analytic review of 21 studies addressing the association between childhood sexual abuse and adolescent pregnancy, Noll and colleagues (2009) reported over a two-fold increase in the odds of experiencing an adolescent pregnancy when prior sexual abuse had occurred.
* A study by Fortin-Langelier and colleagues (2019) was the first matched cohort study assessing the risk of pregnancy and related complications in an adolescent population with corroborated sexual abuse reports. Participants with a history of childhood sexual abuse were at heightened risk of pregnancy.
* Adolescent females in relationships with adult men are more likely to have intercourse at a younger age and have increased rates of pregnancies, even after accounting for a range of associated psychosocial risk factors such as problem drinking, drug use, difficulty in school, and delinquency (Child Trends, 2012; Miller, Clark, & Moore, 1997; Young & d’Arcy, 2005).
* Involvement in sexually exploitative relationships with older male partners are often coercive with detrimental psychological consequences for the girls involved (Darroch, Landry, & Oslak, 1999; Teare & English, 2002; Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2000; Lindberg, Sonenstein, Ku, & Martinez, 1997).

Due to the nature of crimes against sexually exploited adolescents, such victims often present for abortions against their will and in desperate need of intervention to end the victimization.

The experience of childhood sexual abuse is related to increased risks of undergoing abortion in adolescence and early adulthood.

**Findings:**

* Wingood and DiClemente (1997) found that women who had been sexually abused in childhood were 1.5 times more likely to have had an abortion.
* Bourassa and Berube (2007) reported that women who chose to have an abortion were more likely to have been exposed to childhood sexual abuse compared to women continuing with pregnancy.
* Russo and Denious (1998, 2001), using data from a large cross-sectional study of women, found that women who had undergone an abortion were more likely to have been exposed to childhood sexual abuse than women who had not had an abortion.
* Forced abortion among adolescents victimized by sex trafficking has been well-documented (Abdulraheem & Oladipo, 2010; Diep, 2006; Hoyle, Bosworth, & Dempsey, 2011; Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Zimmerman, Hossain & Watts, 2011).
* Women trafficked are often subjected to multiple abortions (Cwikel, Chudakov, Paikin, Agmon, & Belmaker, 2004; U.S. Justice Department, n.d.).
* Egregiously, some women are forced to abort during late pregnancy and to resume sex work only days later (Getu, 2006). A 2011 report of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2013) acknowledged a need for research on the long-term effects of forced abortions on survivors’ sexual and reproductive health.
* In a U.S. cross-sectional study of sex trafficked victims by Muftic and Finn (2013), 58% became pregnant while being trafficked.
* In Lederer and Wetzel’s (2014) study, 71.2% of victims had at least one pregnancy while being trafficked and 21.2% reported five or more pregnancies. Further, more than half of the victims (55.2%) reported at least one abortion and 29.9% reported multiple abortions.
* In Lederer and Wetzel’s study, 52.9% of the sex trafficked victims indicated that one or more of their abortions was at least partly forced. One survivor, whose abuse at the hands of her traffickers was particularly deplorable, reported 17 abortions and indicated that at least some of them were forced. The authors commented that forced abortion violates both the pro-life belief that abortion takes innocent life and the pro-choice ideal of women’s freedom to make their own reproductive decisions.

**Several court cases have involved abortion providers ignoring clear indications that minors are in abusive situations.**

Egregious acts of sexual exploitation against minors rob them of their most basic and essential needs for security and safety and launch a life trajectory marked by severe, often life-long suffering frequently exacerbated by forced abortion. The hidden nature of the crimes combined with ignorance and apathetic behavior by health care professionals, necessitates laws designed to intervene with this highly traumatized, vulnerable, and growing segment of our population.

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