

A Conceptual Model of Sex Trafficking Dynamics in the Context of Pandemics and Provisioning Systems

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Abstract : In the United States (US), “sex trafficking” is defined at the federal level in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 as encompassing a number of processes such as recruitment, transportation, and provision of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act. It involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age. Accumulating evidence suggests that sex trafficking is exacerbated by social and environmental stressors (e.g., pandemics). Given that “provision” is a key part of the definition, “provisioning systems” may offer a useful lens through which to study sex trafficking dynamics. Provisioning systems are the social systems connecting individuals, small groups, entities, and embedded communities as they seek to satisfy their needs and wants for goods, services, experiences and ideas through value-based exchange in communities. This project presents a conceptual framework for understanding sex trafficking dynamics in the context of the COVID pandemic. The framework is developed as a system dynamics simulation model based on published evidence, social and behavioral science theory, and key informant interviews with stakeholders from the Protection, Prevention, Prosecution, and Partnership sectors in one US state. This “4 P Paradigm” has been described as fundamental to the US government’s anti-trafficking strategy. The present research question is: “How do sex trafficking systems (e.g., supply, demand and price) interact with other provisioning systems (e.g., networks of organizations that help sexually exploited persons) to influence trafficking over time vis-à-vis the COVID pandemic?” Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders (n = 19) were analyzed based on grounded theory and combined for computer simulation. The first step (Problem Definition) was completed by open coding video-recorded interviews, supplemented by a literature review. The model depicts provision of sex trafficking services for victims and survivors as declining in March 2020, coincidental with COVID, but eventually rebounding. The second modeling step (Dynamic Hypothesis Formulation) was completed by open- and axial coding of interview segments, as well as consulting peer-reviewed literature. Part of the hypothesized explanation for changes over time is that the sex trafficking system behaves somewhat like a commodities market, with each of the other subsystems exhibiting delayed responses but collectively keeping trafficking levels below what they would be otherwise. Next steps (Model Building & Testing) led to a ‘proof of concept’ model that can be used to conduct simulation experiments and test various action ideas, by taking model users outside the entire system and seeing it whole. If sex trafficking dynamics unfold as hypothesized, e.g., oscillated post-COVID, then one potential leverage point is to address the lack of information feedback loops between the actual occurrence and consequences of sex trafficking and those who seek to prevent its occurrence, prosecute the traffickers, protect the victims and survivors, and partner with the other anti-trafficking advocates. Implications for researchers, administrators, and other stakeholders are discussed.

Keywords : pandemics, provisioning systems, sex trafficking, system dynamics modeling

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