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A Systematic Review of the Literature: Defining Child Sex Trafficking

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Abstract

Depression, anxiety, and other comorbid psychological conditions are commonly found in child sex trafficking victims (Basson et al., 2012; Cole et al., 2016; Cook et al., 2018; Hargreaves-Cormany & Patterson, 2016; Hossain et al., 2010; Hopper, 2017; Middleton et al., 2018; Pierce, 2012; Reid, 2018; Shaw et al., 2017). Given the likelihood that mental health professionals may encounter victims of child sex trafficking, it is necessary to have a comprehensive and universal understanding of sex trafficking in order to most effectively address victims' needs through evidence-based practices and inventions. The purpose of this study was to gain a more informed understanding of how *child sex trafficking* is being defined in the psychological literature. A systematic review of the 21 articles revealed that child sex trafficking is not universally conceptualized with varying and narrow definitions being used as guidelines. These findings inform and highlight the need for a universal, operational definition of child sex trafficking to better assess and serve the needs of victims.

Keywords: sex trafficking, child sex trafficking, child prostitution, child sexual exploitation, minor sex trafficking, juvenile sex trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), and domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST)

A Systematic Review of the Literature: Defining Child Sex Trafficking

Accurate estimations on the number of victims and the scope of child sex trafficking has eluded governments, researchers, and practitioners alike. Due to its covert and clandestine nature, it is difficult to estimate the extent of the issue, as victims are frequently invisible to mainstream culture and law enforcement. These crimes are committed behind closed doors and marginalized groups are often targeted (Minnesota Human Trafficking Task Force [MNHTTF], 2014). The vulnerability of the youth population puts them at significant risk for being trafficked. One study found that, "70% of all sex trafficking victims were under the age of 24 and 30% were under the age of 18" (Farrell et al., 2008, p.2). In 2016, there were 4.8 million people victimized by forced sexual exploitation and over one million of those victims were children (International Labor Organization, 2017).

Furthermore, there is no uniform method for collecting data on victims. Research on sex trafficking is limited, with most available information coming from literature reviews and government reports. Data for these reports are often sourced from hotlines, arrests, indictments, and prosecutions. However, due to the hidden nature of the crime, the majority of sex trafficking cases are underreported or unreported. Publications should also be interpreted with caution because of varying definitions and terminology used during data collection. The definition of *child sex trafficking* differs depending on which legal definitions are observed. Moreover, many of these reports do not distinguish between domestic and international trafficking or between trafficking for sexual exploitation or other purposes (i.e., non-sexual labor). In a review of the literature, Fedina (2014) found that the majority of literature on the overarching topic of human trafficking is not empirically based, and therefore, the true nature of the crime and the characteristics of those involved is largely unknown.

In order to study a phenomenon such as child sex trafficking, researchers need to first operationally define it and agree upon a universal definition. The purpose of this study is to systematically review how the literature is defining child sex trafficking. First, we will examine legal definitions of child sex trafficking and the different forms that have been identified. Next, we will examine how child sex trafficking is being defined in psychological literature. Then, we will discuss the challenges in creating a comprehensive definition. And finally, we conclude by offering recommendations for future efforts to address the challenges in defining child sex trafficking.

Literature Review

Understanding Child Sex Trafficking

"Trafficking in persons" or human trafficking (ILO, 2017; MNHTTF, 2014) is internationally defined by The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000) as:

> The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purposes of exploitation. (p. 42)

Human trafficking can take a variety of forms such as slavery, forced labor or services, servitude, removal of organs, and/or sexual exploitation (United Nations, 2000, P. 42, Article 3).

The First World Congress Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, held in 1996, defined the commercial component of *sexual exploitation* as, "sexual abuse by the adult and remuneration in cash or kind to the child or a third person or persons" (p. 1). It is the

commercial element that separates sexual exploitation from other sexual crimes such as rape, molestation, and sexual assault (Finklea et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2009). Notably, the child is treated as a commercial object and the return can be financial or in-kind. For example, a child involved in prostitution can be compensated monetarily or sexual acts can be exchanged for basic needs such as food or shelter. This exchange of sex acts for basic necessities is also known as survival sex (Dottridge, 2008; Perkins & Ruiz, 2017).

Child sex trafficking is often considered to be an international concern, but it has been documented in all 50 states within the United States (NCMEC, 2020). As defined by the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA, 2000), which was reauthorized in January 2019, sex trafficking refers to, "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act and such act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or when the person induced to perform sex acts is under the age of 18 years" (p. 8). This legislature prohibits human trafficking into, out of, or within the United States. The term *commercial sex act* refers to "any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person" (TVPA, 2000, p. 7). Similar to the United Nations Protocol (2000), the TVPA emphasizes that force, fraud, or coercion is not a required element for persons trafficked under 18 years of age to qualify as sex trafficking victims. As children are not able to provide legal consent, and therefore, are considered victims when engaged in illegal sexual activities.

United States legislation on sex trafficking can vary from state to state. Minnesota Statues (609.321, Subd. 7a.) define sex trafficking as the, "receiving, recruiting, enticing, harboring, providing, or obtaining by any means an individual to aid in the prostitution of the individual; or by receiving profit or anything of value, knowing or having reason to know it is derived from [the sex trafficking of an individual]." Force, fraud, and coercion are not required for the

prosecution of sex trafficking cases at the state level for any age of victim. Minnesota law (609.321, subd. 9) defines prostitution as, “hiring, offering to hire, or agreeing to hire another individual to engage in sexual penetration or sexual contact, or being hired, offering to be hired, or agreeing to be hired by another individual to engage in sexual penetration or contact.” Unlike international and federal law, a pimp, madam, or third party who receives profits from the prostitution is a requirement for the prostitution to be considered sex trafficking in Minnesota (The Advocates of Human Rights, 2020).

Another notable inconsistency (illustrated in Table 1), is whether movement is required for a case of child sexual exploitation to be considered human trafficking. Internationally, organizations such as ECPAT International and the International Labour Organization (ILO), argue that movement for the purpose of sexual exploitation is a necessary element for a case to be regarded as human trafficking. ILO asserts that movement within a country or across borders is necessary “in order to distinguish trafficking from other forms of slavery and slave-like practices” (as cited in Dottridge, 2008). Dottridge (2008) argues that this distinction is necessary because prevention and intervention strategies will vary depending on whether children were exploited abroad or at or near home. While these assertions have merit, evidence suggests that more children are trafficked within larger countries like China, India, and the United States than across international borders (Dottridge, 2008; Kotrla, 2010). Within the United States, while the term sex trafficking implies movement, the TVPA (2000) does not require victims to be physically moved or transported from one location to another. In the past, sex trafficking has been interpreted similarly to current international interpretations to only include victims that had been transported across national or international borders (United States Department of State, 2006). Current interpretations dictate that sex trafficking can occur within the home, within the

neighborhood, across the state, across the country, or internationally. The sex trafficking of American children within the United States is commonly refer to as *domestic minor sex trafficking* (DMST) (Kotrla, 2010; Smith et al.,2009). Similar to human trafficking, sex trafficking is defined by exploitation instead of movement (Rafferty, 2013).

Table 1

Legal Definitions of Sex Trafficking.

Level	Action	Means	Movement	Purpose	Defining Purpose
International Law	Recruited, transported, transferred, harbored or received of persons	**Under 18:** No threat or use of force/ coercion required	Required	"Sexual exploitation"	Sexual abuse by the adult and remuneration in cash or kind to the child or a third person or persons
Federal Law	Recruited, transported, transferred, harbored or received of persons	**Under 18:** No threat or use of force/ coercion required	Not required	"Commercial sex act"	Any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person
State Law (Minnesota)	Received, recruited, enticed, harbored, provided, or obtained of persons	**All ages:** No threat or use of force/ coercion required	Not required	"Prostitution"	Hiring, offering to hire, or agreeing to hire another individual to engage in sexual penetration or sexual contact, or being hired, offering to be hired, or agreeing to be hired by another individual to engage in sexual penetration or contact

Forms of Sexual Exploitation

According to federal law, the sexual exploitation of children includes exotic dancing, prostitution, child pornography, live or online sex shows, or any commercial sex act that is exchanged to *any person* for anything of value. This means that the child can be both the

recipient of the money or item and the victim in a sex trafficking exchange. Thus, children that participate in survival sex are still recognized as victims of child sex trafficking. Federal law dictates that, if no other trafficker is identified, the "john" who caused a child to engage in sex acts for money is considered the trafficker (Adelson, 2008).

Conversely, some state courts might be reluctant to recognize sex trafficking in the absence of a third-party. In many states, a child may simultaneously be identified as both a criminal and a victim for the same crime (Adelson, 2008). For example, The Minnesota Human Trafficking Task Force (MNHTTF Principle Positions, 2014) asserts that some forms of commercial sexual exploitation (i.e., prostitution, exotic dancing, escort services, pornography, phone sex, survival sex, or other forms of trading sex), while violations of human rights, are not recognized by Minnesota law as sex trafficking. Under Minnesota law, prostitution and these other forms of commercial sexual exploitation are only considered sex trafficking when a third party is involved in or benefits from the sexual exchange. These variations in definitions again make it difficult to identify victims/traffickers and develop appropriate and thorough prevention, assessment, and intervention strategies.

Current Study

While there are many legal definitions (as summarized in Table 1) and terms used within the literature, the focus of this study is to examine how the literature in the field of psychology is specifically defining child sex trafficking. A systematic review of English-language peer-reviewed studies was conducted with the focus on operational definitions of child sex trafficking within studies published after 2000 in the United States. The publication year of 2000 was chosen because sex trafficking was defined that year in the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

Methods

Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

The literature was systematically searched using three electronic databases: PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, and Psychology Database (formerly ProQuest Psychology Journals). First, the terms “sex trafficking,” “child sex trafficking,” “child prostitution,” “child sexual exploitation,” “minor sex trafficking,” “juvenile sex trafficking,” “commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC),” and “domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST),” were individually searched in the databases (n= 2,430). The quotation mark (“”) served to restrict phrases (verbatim search) while performing the searches. The results were then limited to peer-reviewed journal articles written in English within a specified time frame (after 2000). All literature published before October 28, 2019 was eligible for inclusion in the systematic review of the psychological research. Next, specific phrase operators “AND” and “OR” were utilized to further narrow the search to studies within the psychological research literature (Figure 1). There were six related terms: “psychotherapy,” “psychology,” “mental health,” “mental disorders,” “mental illness,” and “trauma,” that were searched along with the initial sex trafficking related search terms to narrow the search to the psychological literature. The phrase operator “AND” served as a specifier which narrowed the search by using combinations of the discrete terms. Conversely, the phrase operator “OR” was used to broaden the search scope of a term by including synonyms or other related variant terms.

Figure 1

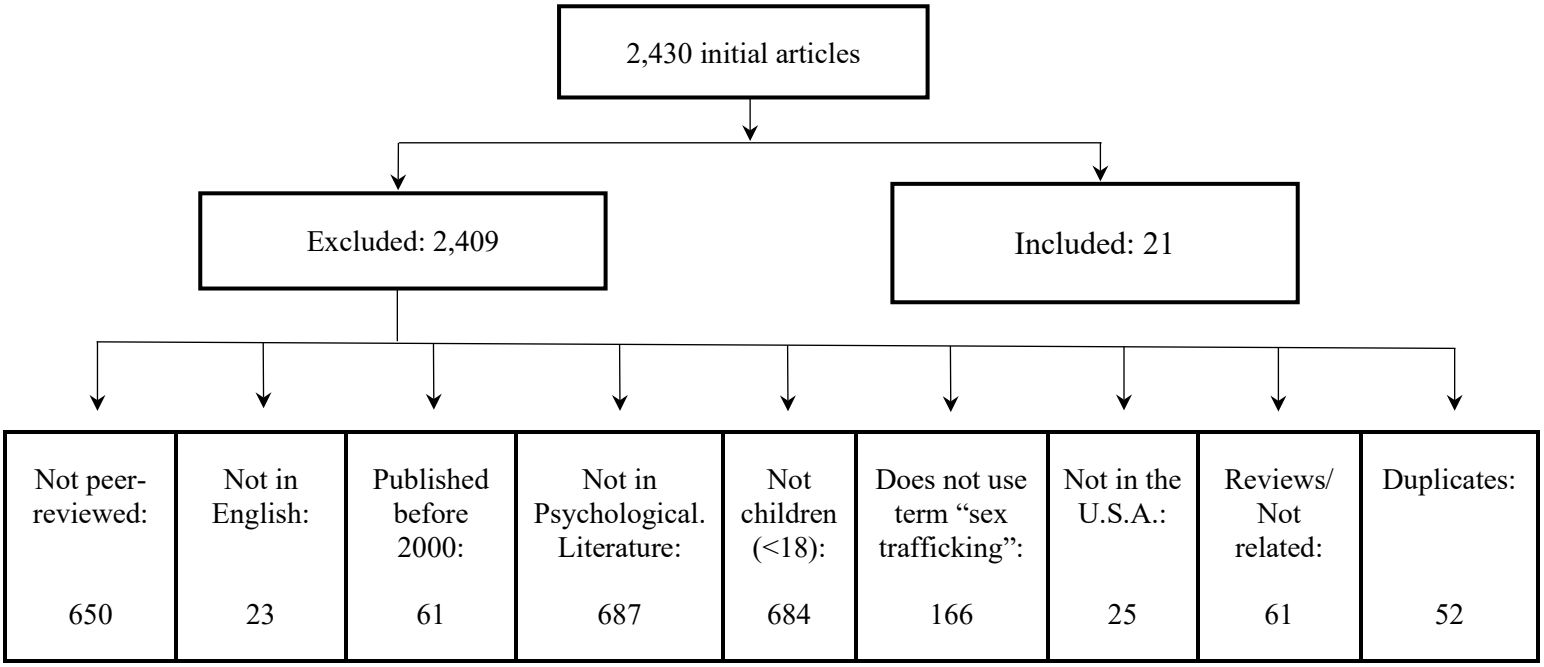
Example command line utilized in the Advanced Search for all three databases.

Command Line	"child sex trafficking" AND (“psychotherapy” OR “psychology” OR "mental health" OR "mental disorders" OR "mental illness" OR “trauma”)

Next, given that the main purpose of this systematic review was to examine the operational definition of child sex trafficking, the search was restricted by excluding articles focused on adult sex trafficking and articles which exclusively investigated other trafficking-related phenomenon (e.g., child prostitution, child pornography). Lastly, the full-text of the remaining articles (n=163) were independently reviewed for eligibility. Articles were excluded if they were not conducted within the United States, were duplicates, or were general overviews on the topic of child sex trafficking. The complete process of study selection is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

Flow diagram of study selection, a systematic review of research with an operational definition of "child sex trafficking" within the United States.



Data Extraction

A coding guide was created to review the remaining thirty-three articles to analyzed and extract descriptive results. Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel were used to create the coding

guides. The main sections of the coding guide were as follows: Database, Article Characteristics, Ages, Other Demographics, Literature Review Definitions, Measures and Article Definitions, and Findings. Article Characteristics documented the title, authors, and publication year. The Ages section was to document whether the ages of the victims were described in the article. The Other Demographics section was used to report any other demographics that were pertinent to the study such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Literature Review Definitions documented any legal or other definitions of child sex trafficking, domestic child sex trafficking, etc. that were cited within the literature review of the article. Measures and Article Definitions documented the authors' use of measures and the operational definitions of child sex trafficking that accompanied them. Lastly, Findings documented any relevant conclusions or discoveries of the reviewed articles. The extracted operational definitions were broken down into conceptual components for comparative purposes. Articles which met required qualification without containing operational definitions were still included in the analyses.

Results

Age

Studies varied in whether researchers reported the current age of the victims and the age at which they were recruited into sex trafficking, with some studies only reporting one or the other (Table 2). Ages of the participants at the time of the study (N=17) ranged from 6 years old to 32 years old, with the mean age of 16.22 years old. One study did not provide a range of ages for their sample, but instead specified that their sample was under the age of 18 years old. Eight of the 17 articles examining youth had participants that were over the age of 18. There were seven studies with participants that reported their age at the time of the exploitation. In these studies, the ages of the participants ranged from 4 to 23 years old, with a mean of 14.54 years

old. One of these seven studies included participants who were exploited for the first time between the ages of 18 to 23 years old when examining child sex trafficking.

Table 2

Ages of the sampled populations examined in the literature.

	Descriptive Statistics – Age	
	Age at the time of the study	Age at the time of exploitation
1	12 – 25 years old (M = 19.62)	N/A
2	14 – 19 years old (M = 16.13)	N/A
3	06 – 17 years old (M = 11.96)	N/A
4	12 – 17 years old (M = 15.84)	N/A
5	N/A	04 – 17 years old (M = 12.36)
6	12 – 20 years old (M = 16.70)	N/A
7	10 – 17 years old (M = 13.65)	N/A
8	14 – 32 years old (M = 19.00)	N/A
9	12 – 25 years old (M = 19.65)	12 – 23 years old (M = 16.38)
10	12 – 17 years old (M = 16.00)	N/A
11	N/A	11 – 17 years old (M = 15.00)
12	12 – 18 years old (M = 16.10)	N/A
13	10 – 24 years old (M = 19.00)	10 – 17 years old (M = 15.00)
14	11 – 21 years old (M = 16.00)	N/A
15	N/A	04 – 17 years old (M = 14.25)
16	10 – 20 years old (M = 15.10)	N/A
17	N/A	05 – 17 years old (M = 14.22)
18	<18 years old (M = 16.00)	N/A
19	11 – 17 years old (M = 15.50)	12 – 17 years old (M = 14.58)
20	14 – 18 years old (M = 16.40)	N/A
21	11 – 17.5 years old (M = 13.15)	N/A

Other Demographics

In regards to race and ethnicity, there was only one study that did not measure this demographic. Two studies made comparisons between white participants and their defined counterparts of “non-whites” or “minorities.” The other 19 articles examined participants that were African American/Black, Caucasian/White, Biracial/Mixed Race, African/Caribbean, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, Arab, Asian/Pacific Islander, Haitian, and/or “Other.” One study focused entirely on Native American youth. One study reported that 83.9% of their sample

was White, but did not indicate how the other 16.1% of the sample identified. Not including the Native American study, 14 out of the 19 articles had samples with racial and ethnic minority groups being the majority. These findings are inconsistent with the United States 2018 Census indicating that 60.4% of the population identify as Caucasian (with no Hispanic or Latino origin) (United States Census Bureau, 2019).

Sexual identity was only measured in three of the 21 articles. Only one of those articles measured sexual orientation beyond whether the participants identified as LGBTQ or GLBTQ. The majority (n=11) of articles reported having samples of participants with different gender identities. However, the same three articles that measured sexual orientation were also the only three articles to measure gender identity beyond the male or female dichotomy. One study reported that 58.1% of their study identified as female, but did not indicate how the other 41.9% of their sample identified. There were nine articles that had female only samples and one study that examined a male only sample. The majority of these studies did not indicate how gender identity was determined. For example, some studies reported that their samples resided at residential facilities for females, but the researchers did not indicate how gender was determined for placement in those facilities.

Table 3

Other descriptive statistics examined in the literature.

Descriptive Statistics – Other						
	Race		Sexual Orientation		Gender	
1	White	32.0 %	Heterosexual	72.8 %	Female	49.2 %
	Black	45.1 %	Bisexual	15.2 %	Male	47.7 %
	Biracial/Mixed	09.0 %	Gay	03.2 %	Other	02.3 %
	Hispanic	03.3 %	Asexual	03.2 %	(transgender, etc.)	
	African/Caribbean	06.6 %	Pansexual	03.2 %		
	Native American	02.5 %	Lesbian	00.8 %		
	Arab	01.6 %	Other	01.6 %		
2	White	58.0 %	N/A		Female*	
	Black	37.0 %				

	Mixed	05.0 %			
3	White	83.9 %	N/A	Female	58.1 %
4	White Non-White	66.5 % 33.5 %	N/A	Female Male	31.9 % 68.1 %
5	White Black Hispanic/Latino	52.9 % 35.5 % 11.8 %	N/A	Female Male	76.5 % 23.5 %
6	White Black Hispanic Native American Asian/Pacific Islander Other No information	45.6 % 37.7 % 05.8 % 05.3 % 00.3 % 05.4 % 07.3 %	N/A	Male*	
7	White Minority	42.5 % 57.5 %	N/A	Female Male	60.44 % 39.56 %
8	White Black Biracial Hispanic	53.0 % 35.0 % 12.0 % 24.0 %	N/A	Female*	
9	White Black Biracial	29.8 % 42.7 % 09.2 %	Heterosexual 71.0 % LGBTQ 24.4 % No response 04.5 %	Female Male Transgender Non-conforming Two-spirit	48.1 % 47.3 % 00.8 % 00.8 % 00.8 %
10	White Black Hispanic Asian Other	04.0 % 74.0 % 18.0 % 02.0 % 02.0 %	N/A	Female*	
11	White Black Hispanic Asian Other Unknown	34.1 % 37.4 % 15.6 % 02.8 % 03.9 % 06.1 %	N/A	Female*	
12	White Black Other	25.6 % 59.3 % 15.1 %	N/A	Female Male	94.3 % 05.7 %
13	White Black Latino	13.0 % 22.0 % 66.0 %	LGBTQ 16.0 %	Female Male Transgender	88.0 % 06.0 % 06.0 %

14	Native American	100 %		Female*	
15	White Black Hispanic Haitian Other	13.0 % 43.0 % 32.0 % 09.0 % 04.0 %	N/A	Female*	
16	White Black Hispanic Other Unknown	39.5 % 23.3 % 34.9 % 09.3 % 27.9 %	N/A	Female Male	88.4 % 11.6 %
17	White Black Hispanic Haitian Other	17.0 % 43.0 % 30.0 % 06.0 % 06.0 %	N/A	Female*	
18	White Black Hispanic Haitian	07.7 % 38.5 % 34.6 % 19.2 %	N/A	Female*	
19	White Black Mixed race Hispanic Native American Asian	30.4 % 23.0 % 15.6 % 22.2 % 04.4 % 01.4 %	N/A	Female*	
20	White Black Hispanic Native American Other or Biracial	20.2 % 41.4 % 33.5 % 02.0 % 03.0 %	N/A	Female Male	13.6 % 86.4 %
21	N/A		N/A	Female Male	53.71 % 46.29 %

Note: *These studies did not indicate what percentage of their sample identified as female/male.

Measures

In the current study, 33% (n=7) of the articles relied on self-report questionnaires and 24% (n=5) used qualitative interviews to gather information from their participants. As discussed below, these methods of data collection are limited by reporting biases which may involve memory distortion, misperceptions, avoidance, and social desirability. These methods are

dependent on the respondents' willingness to be honest about their experiences. Therefore, there may have been some experiences that were not captured. Four studies (19%) utilized both qualitative interviews and records for data collection. The other 24% (n=5) of the studies examined only records to gather information about their participants. Some researchers used clinical records that included psychosocial assessments, intake interviews, guardian reports, and/or results of psychological testing. In four studies (19%), researchers were also able to access law enforcement records and official criminal histories. The limitation of this method is that the researchers were not able to do direct clinical assessments. The researchers were dependent on the findings of law enforcements officers and the legal definitions observed or mental health professionals. Conclusions were limited due to records not containing research-based interviews or standardized intellectual or psychological assessments. Additionally, interviewing styles may have varied, and therefore, some experiences may have been unreported. Of the 15 articles reliant on interviews and records, only three articles identified what definition of sex trafficking was utilized to determine whether their participants were victims of child sex trafficking.

Table 4

Measures utilized in the examined articles.

	Measures	Definition	Type
1	"Have you ever been compelled, forced, or coerced to perform a sexual act, including sexual intercourse, oral or anal contact for money, food, clothing, drugs, protection, or a place to stay?" "Do you currently have a person who encourages/pressures/forces you to exchange sexual acts for money, drugs, food, a place to stay, clothing, or protection?" "In the past, has anyone encouraged/pressured/forced you to exchange sexual acts for money, drugs, food, place to stay, clothing, or protection?"	Questions	Self-report
2	Qualitative interviews: youth were asked whether they had engaged in trading sex or were forced to ''trade'' sex.	Questions	Interviews
3	Data extracted from clinical records.	Federal	Records
4	"Have you ever given someone sex for drugs or money?"	Question	Self-report
5	Victims were identified by law enforcement officials.	International	Records

6	"Before I was arrested, I was paid to have sexual relations with someone."	Question	Self-report
7	"In the past 6 months, have you been paid for having sexual relations with someone?"	Question	Self-report
8	Females with a history of trauma exposure, including being at high risk for or having a documented history of sex trafficking.	No definition	Interview
9	"Have you ever been compelled, forced, or coerced to perform a sexual act, including sexual intercourse, oral or anal contact for money, food, clothing, drugs, protection, or a place to stay?" "Do you currently have a person who encourages/pressures/forces you to exchange sexual acts for money, drugs, food, a place to stay, clothing, or protection?" "In the past, has anyone encouraged/pressured/forced you to exchange sexual acts for money, drugs, food, place to stay, clothing, or protection?"	Questions	Self-report
10	Records from STAR Court, a specialty court program designed specifically for CSE youth	No definition	Records
11	Case files including law enforcement records, official criminal histories, and interviews with offenders, investigators and survivors	No definition	Records & Interviews
12	Assessed and confirmed by a qualified professional as a survivor of commercial sexual exploitation.	No definition	Interviews
13	Records of psychological evaluations from Project REACH, programming that serves survivors of labor and sex trafficking.	No definition	Records
14	Victims were questioned about family and friends' engagement in the sex trade, personal involvement in the sex trade, traffickers in participants' environments and/or social networks, whether participants have been asked or pressured to pose for pornography, and whether they have been asked or pressured to recruit other girls/women to sell sex.	No definition	Interviews
15	Records included psychosocial assessments, intake interviews, law enforcement or guardian reports, and results of psychological testing.	No definition	Records & Interviews
16	Youth who reported involvement with prostitution via the question "exchanging sex for money, drugs, or other resources."	Question	Self-report
17	Records included psychosocial assessments, intake interviews, law enforcement or guardian reports, and results of psychological testing.	No definition	Records & Interviews
18	Reviewed admission records for girls referred to Project Gold for "sexual problems."	No definition	Records
19	During intake, victims were questioned about exchanging sex for something of value such as money, drugs, protection, or a place to stay. Identified by the program clinical supervisor as either being or not being victimized by CSEC.	Federal	Interviews
20	"Have you been paid by someone for having sexual relationship with them?" or based on the official report of youth arrest for prostitution	Question	Self-report or Records
21	"In the past 6 months, have you been paid for having sexual relations with someone?"	Question	Self-report

Recruitment

Of the 21 examined studies, all but one of them (91%) relied on social services and/or legal services to gain access to their participants. Two studies (9.5%) utilized data from the

National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW – II), a national longitudinal study on the safety and well-being of child welfare–involved youth and their families. Two studies examined data from Project REACH, a program that provides direct client services such as crisis intervention, psychological evaluations, brief intervention, and long-term therapy. The studies varied in that one employed data from randomized charts from Project REACH, while the other examined data specifically from a residential treatment facility associated with Project REACH. Another two studies obtained their data from eight homeless youth serving agencies in the same geographical area. The only study that did not obtain their data from a social service and/or legal agency, gathered information about their participants by utilizing the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, a questionnaire that was administered at high schools and middle schools across the United States.

Table 5

Recruitment methods utilized within the examined articles.

	Recruitment Methods	Type
1	Social services agencies for youth experiencing homelessness	Social Services
2	Juvenile detention center	Legal
3	Outpatient, academic medical center for clinical services related to their child maltreatment experiences	Social Services
4	National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health	Other
5	Legal records of the FBI Miami Field Office	Legal
6	Facility that provides treatment for youth charged with sexual and non-sexual offenses	Social Services & Legal
7	Waves 1 and 2 of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II)	Social Services & Legal
8	Project REACH	Social Services
9	Social services agencies for youth experiencing homelessness	Social Services
10	Succeeding Through Achievement and Resilience (STAR) Court, a specialty court program designed specifically for CSE youth	Legal
11	Cases involving the sex trafficking of juveniles that were adjudicated	Legal
12	A specialized treatment program for youth in the child welfare system who are involved in commercial sexual exploitation	Social Services & Legal
13	Project REACH	Social Services
14	Strength based and culturally centered programming that serves Native American girls and young women	Social Services
15	Case files of trafficked girls gathered from social service agencies	Social Services

16	National Child Traumatic Stress Network Core Data Set (NCTSN CDS), from services provided at community-based outpatient mental health clinics, child welfare agencies, juvenile justice facilities, and schools	Social Services & Legal
17	Case files of trafficked girls gathered from social service agencies	Social Services
18	Admission records of CSE victims enrolled in an intervention called Project Gold	Social Services
19	Records from a large group home program designed to serve adolescent girls at high risk for CSEC	Social Services
20	Waves 1 and 3 of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II)	Social Services & Legal
21	Pathways to Desistance study, a longitudinal investigation of the transition from adolescence to adulthood of delinquent youth	Legal

Literature Reviews

The majority (61.9%, n=13) of the authors referenced the federal TVPA legislation in their literature reviews. Three articles (14%) discussed both the TVPA and international definitions from the United Nations and the First World Congress. Four studies (19%) just referenced international definitions from the United Nations and the First World Congress. In addition to discussion on federal legislation, only two studies (10%) discussed varying definitions of sex trafficking within state legislation in the United States. One study (5%) described the Institute of Medicine's definition of commercial sexual exploitation of youth in addition to the federal definition of sex trafficking. Four articles (19%) did not discuss legal definitions or provide any definitions for reference. This is problematic because it is not clear what definitions researchers are considering or the populations that they may or may not have included in their sample. For example, a researcher following international legal definitions may not consider victims that were trafficked within state borders (i.e. no movement) to be considered victims of sex trafficking, but the reader would not be aware of this exclusion without some contextual reference.

Table 6

Legal definitions discussed in the literature reviews.

Literature Reviews		
	Legal Definitions	Type
1	TVPA	Federal
2	TVPA	Federal
3	First World Congress, TVPA	International, Federal
4	TVPA	Federal
5	First World Congress, United Nations	International
6	TVPA, Discussed variations in state laws	Federal and State
7	TVPA, Discussed variations in state laws	Federal and State
8	United Nations	International
9	TVPA	Federal
10	Institute of Medicine, TVPA	Other, Federal
11	No definition	No legal definition
12	No definition	No legal definition
13	No definition	No legal definition
14	TVPA	Federal
15	No definition	No legal definition
16	First World Congress, TVPA	International, Federal
17	TVPA	Federal
18	United Nations	International
19	TVPA, United Nations	Federal, International
20	TVPA	Federal
21	United Nations	International

Discussion

Age

There was some conflicting methodology related to how the ages were reported in the examined studies. The United Nations defines "youth" as the ages between 15 and 24 years old (Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Youth, 2020). There were three studies (14%) that examined participants that were over the age of 24 years old and there was no indication of when the participants had been exploited. Therefore, it is unclear whether these studies examined sexually exploited youth or individuals involved in sex trafficking as adults. Of the 21 articles included in this study, eight studies (38%) included participants over the age of 18 years old. According to federal law, these participants would not be victims of child sex trafficking. Again, this brings into question whether the samples represented minors involved in sex trafficking or the perspectives of young adults that became involved in selling sex after 18 years old.

Researchers in one study (5%) informed their participants that they were mandated reporter and would be required to report youth under the age of 18 years old. This may have resulted in a response bias, as participants may not have felt safe enough to disclose their true age or may have inflated their age. Furthermore, the participants may have been reluctant to report instances of sexual violence enacted against them. These differences in methodology have the potential to greatly impact the data being collected and our understanding of child sex trafficking.

Other Demographics

Traffickers often target marginalized and vulnerable populations. Most of the articles (73%) examined in this study had a majority of participants identifying as a racial or ethnic minority. These findings are fitting with the research on populations that are of greatest risk for being trafficked. Fedina et al. (2019) found that participants of a racial and ethnic minority were more than twice as likely to be involved in child sex trafficking than white participants. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, from 2012 to 2017, African-American children have consistently comprised 52-62% of all arrests for child prostitution. There is limited research examining the interconnectedness of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, legal involvement, and involvement in sex trafficking. Additionally, more research is needed to examine how racial and ethnic differences may alter the experience of being involved in the commercial sex industry.

Due to being at an increased risk, many of the articles examined in this study focused on female victims. However, future researchers and practitioners are encouraged to equally screen male-identified and female-identified youth for child sex trafficking victimization. One study by O'Brien, White, and Rizo (2017) found that both male and female child welfare-involved youth in their sample were equally as likely to endorse involvement with child sex trafficking. Another

study found that 21% of their sample of child sex trafficking victims were male-identified (Fedina et al., 2019). O'Brien et al. (2017) argued that male-identified youth may face additional barriers to reporting victimization such as societal pressures to display "strength and self-assurance." Many of the articles examined in the current study did not observe nor measure genders beyond male and female. For this reason, their findings related to gender may not accurately reflect the victimization for any gender identity.

Forge et al. (2018) found that LGBT homeless youth were significantly more likely to be victimized by sex trafficking than heterosexual and cisgender youth. Another study found that nearly one-third of sexually exploited youth self-identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual (Holger-Ambrose et al., 2013). Yet, only three articles (14%) examined in this study measured for sexual orientation. Due to sex trafficking victims often being from marginalized groups, researchers and practitioners alike should be making efforts to be culturally relevant when conducting research or providing services.

Measures

Two different studies (10%) utilized the Youth Experiences Survey (YES), a 60-item survey developed by Arizona State University's Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research, to measure whether participants had ever been involved with sex trafficking. Specifically, the tool measured participants' experiences with performing sexual acts that they were encouraged, pressured, and/or forced into completing for money, drugs, food, a place to stay, clothing, or protection. This is a problematic method of measurement because it is common for victims of sex trafficking to not recognize themselves as being victims of sex trafficking. Research has shown that victims often do not recognize their exploitation because the trauma will result in "trauma bonding," also known as Stockholm syndrome or developing a strong bond with their

traffickers (Basson et al., 2012; Landers et al, 2017; Reid, 2016). Landers et al. (2017) found in their study that 68% of their sample of sexually exploited welfare-involved youth exhibited signs of trauma bonding and 61.8% did not consider themselves to be sexually exploited. Additionally, 49.2% did not demonstrate any awareness of their victimization. The researchers explained that the majority of their sample defended their perpetrators and believed that the perpetrators were acting in their best interest. Therefore, victims may not have identified with feeling encouraged, pressured, and/or forced and may have responded "no" to these questions. The element of force, according to federal definitions, is also superfluous in that it is not necessary when youth are involved. Youth under the age of 18 are not able to legally consent to sexual acts, and therefore, it is definitionally irrelevant if they felt encouraged, pressured, and/or forced.

However, the YES was successful in measuring involvement with at least a few types of sexual acts. Respondents were asked whether they had participated in sexual intercourse, oral or anal contact. This is not an inclusive list, but unlike some of the other articles examined in the current study, at least some of the sex acts being measured were elaborated upon. A study conducted by McNeal and Walker (2016), measured sex trafficking by asking participants via a national in-school questionnaire if they "[had] ever given someone sex for drugs or money?" This measure does not elaborate on what is considered sex and it also does not encompass sex acts beyond sex that could be exchanged (i.e. stripping, pornography) for money or in-kind. Three other studies (14%) utilized measures that asked respondents if they had been paid to have "sexual relations" with someone. Similarly, a study by Perkins and Ruiz (2017) measured "survival sex" by asking their participants whether they had ever ''traded'' sex for drugs, clothes, food, etc. either by choice or because of threats/coercion. Terms like "sex" or "sex acts" or "sexual relations" can have multiple interpretations. Questions without examples or

definitions may not capture all the sexual acts that legally constitute sex trafficking. Thus, comparison groups may have included sexually exploited children. As a result, analyses would underestimate the differences between the groups and possibly increase the probability of Type II errors (Cole et al., 2016).

Additionally, federal and legal definitions indicate that sex trafficking encompasses a myriad of sexual acts in exchange for money, food, shelter, and/or drugs. These measures also do not account for other forms of compensation like basic needs (food, shelter, etc.). The Perkins and Ruiz (2017) study distinguished between participants involved in sex trafficking and "survival sex" in their results, but they failed to describe how these variables varied in how they were measured. Nevertheless, federal law recognizes survival sex as a component of child sex trafficking and not a separate form of exploitation. Two of the studies (10%) also only asked about whether their participants had been paid for having sexual relations with someone in the last six months. Age is the only time related requirement of child sex trafficking. These ambiguous questions may also not gather responses from individuals that were not on the receiving end of the compensation. For example, a participant may not have responded "yes" if it was a third-party that benefited financially or otherwise from the exchange. Additionally, participants may have inferred that these questions meant paying a prostitute for services and not being the one to provide services for compensation. These ambiguities could lead to drastically different results.

Many of the assessments examined in this study also measured sex trafficking based on the assumption that the trafficker would be a boyfriend, pimp, or a non-familial party. However, assessments should consider the possibility that the trafficker may be a parent or caregiver. Research has shown that parents or caregivers may sell pornography of their children and/or

sexual access to their children to obtain money, drugs, or shelter (Cole et al., 2016; Kimley et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009; Sprang & Cole, 2018). Between May 2017 and December 2018, the Minnesota Department of Human Services received 651 reports of child sexual exploitation and child sex trafficking. Parents or caregivers were alleged to be offenders in about 50% of those cases (as cited in ECPAT-USA, 2019). Familial child sex trafficking occurs at an alarming rate and should be considered when developing assessments or measures of sex trafficking. It should be noted that mislabeling child sex trafficking by parents or caregivers as child sexual abuse without acknowledging the commercial component can result in traffickers being charged with lesser offences and continued abuse (Smith et al., 2009). Sprang and Cole (2018) found that only two-thirds of familial sex traffickers were criminally charged and only 30% were charged with a crime associated with trafficking. Moreover, in almost two-thirds of the cases studied, victims had ongoing contact with the trafficker.

In the study by Sprang and Cole (2018), they had examined records and used the federal definition to determine their sample. While another study by Klimley et al. (2018) also examined records, but used the international definition. Notably the article that utilized the international definition did not include child pornography or child prostitution as trafficking. O'Brien, Li, et al. (2017) acknowledged the federal definition and all the forms of sexual exploitation (e.g., prostitution, phone sex, pornographic photos, survival sex, sex for drugs, and internet-based sex) included within that, but still chose to only measure child prostitution via the question, “Before I was arrested, I was paid to have sexual relations with someone.” The rationale being that child prostitution was the only recognized form of sex trafficking in all definitional arguments. Even with legislation as guidelines, researchers use varying definitions of child sex trafficking and often do not distinguish between different forms of it. Only one study (Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz,

2018) identified that their definition of "commercial sexual exploitation of children" aligns with the federal legislation on child sex trafficking. Nevertheless, the presence of respondents affirming that they have been involved sex trafficking in these studies, even when it has been so poorly measured in the research, indicates that there are likely many other children who have engaged in sexual acts that meet federal definitions of sex trafficking that are not being studied.

If researchers are only asking a few questions to determine victim status, as seen in eight of the 21 articles examined in this study, then it is crucial to be inclusive in the language of the question. Researchers should be inclusive by using language that encompasses the varying forms of sexual acts and compensation involved in the different forms of child sex trafficking. Researchers should also consider that there may or may not be a third-party and that third-party could be a parent or caregiver. Once identified, researchers should ask follow-up questions to gain insight into the characteristics of their participants' sex-trafficking experiences. Ideally, researchers should aim to examine both the population of children with sex trafficking experiences and the samples within that population of different forms of sex trafficking.

Recruitment

A common method to gain access to victims is through legal and social services. As noted previously, 91% of the examined articles utilized social or legal services or records. However, many victims do not have access to or are distrustful of these services. Victims of sex trafficking have historically been arrested for prostitution and treated as criminals (Adelson, 2008; MNHTTF Human trafficking & law enforcement, 2014). And as previously noted, a child may simultaneously be identified as both a criminal and a victim for the same crime. Despite conflicting federal and state laws, a child can still be arrested, detained, and prosecuted for prostitution in most states (Bendtsen, 2018). In recent years, some states have started enacting

"Safe Harbor Laws" or laws that mandate that state level systems (e.g. law enforcement, child welfare) cannot criminalize behaviors implicit to a child's victimization (O'Brien, Li, et al., 2017). Safe Harbor Laws are currently enacted in 34 states (Polaris, 2015), however, it is unclear how well these laws are understood or followed by law enforcement officials. Additionally, while victims may not be charged with prostitution, they may still be arrested for other trafficking related offenses (drug charges, etc.). The Safe Harbor laws in some states also only provide protection to victims if they assist law enforcement officials in the investigation and prosecution of their trafficker (Shared Hope International, 2012, as cited in Reid, 2016). Among other concerns mentioned below, victims may be reluctant to aid law enforcement because of fear of retaliation from their traffickers (Reid, 2016). Researchers should acknowledge how state laws may interfere with data collection and educate participants to limit the strength of this barrier. Otherwise, participants may not have wanted to disclose their victimization due to fear of the legal consequences.

Victims may also not disclose their victimization or seek out services because they feel loyalty towards, or fear retaliation from, their traffickers. Retaliation may be in the form of abuse, rape, torture, threats to family or children, or threats of prosecution or deportation (The Advocates for Human Rights, 2020). Additionally, victims may not self-identify as being trafficked and again may not seek out services (Jones et al., 2007; NCMEC, 2019; The Advocates for Human Rights, 2020). Lastly, victims may avoid social services because they feel shame or distress about their families knowing of their victimization (Jones et al., 2007). Due to limited methodology in the research, it is unknown whether the findings in studies with individuals that seek out services can even be generalize to individuals who choose not to access or cannot receive services.

Professional Support

The importance of having a clear definition is essential for professionals in law enforcement and social services to provide adequate care for victims that do seek out services. Identifying cases of child sex trafficking can be difficult for law enforcement professionals. For example, victims can often be carrying false identification that indicates that they are at least 18-years old. Naive to their real age, officers may cite these victims with prostitution or other minor charges (Smith et al., 2009). Alternatively, officers may misidentified the children as victims of sexual abuse, and while this is accurate, this labeling ignores the complexity of being a victim of child sex trafficking (Perkins & Ruiz, 2017). For example, research has shown that children involved in prostitution experience higher rates of sexualized behavior, avoidance, arousal, and dissociation than children that were sexually abused but not commercially exploited (Cole et al., 2016). Another study found that commercially sexually exploited youth were more likely to be withdrawn, depressed, have somatic complaints, have attention problems, and be engaged in rule-breaking behaviors than sexually abused youth (Shaw et al., 2017). These findings support the notion that there is psychological harm, beyond those associated with sexual abuse, to victims of child sex trafficking. In more overt cases of sex exploitation, children will be advertised to members of the public via the internet. Even in those cases, law enforcement will still need to provide proof of movement, recruitment, the type of exploitation, etc. to meet the legal definition and to successfully charge traffickers with child sex trafficking. However, prosecuting traffickers (whether successful or not) is not enough, there also needs to be established programs designed to protect victims of sex trafficking from further trauma. Research has shown that many trafficked children will return to their traffickers, even after the involvement of law enforcement (Smith et al., 2009).

Social workers and professionals in the social services are often a less threatening opportunity to seek out support. Many parts of the world utilize telephone helplines and hotlines to reports potential cases sexual exploitation and to connect with social services. Through these services, victims will hopefully be connected to resources, receive protection from their traffickers, and obtain necessary support to address the likely outcome of being a child sex trafficking victim. Due to level of trauma exposure, sex trafficking victims are at great risk for developing psychological conditions. Research has found that depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are all prevalent psychological conditions found in child sex trafficking victims (Basson et al., 2012; Cole et al., 2016; Cook et al., 2018; Hargreaves-Cormany & Patterson, 2016; Hopper, 2017; Hossain et al., 2010; Middleton et al., 2018; Pierce, 2012; Reid, 2018; Shaw et al., 2017). In a study by Frey et al. (2019), homeless sex trafficking victims are over 4 times more likely to have a suicidal attempt, when compared with youth experiencing homelessness who had not experienced sex trafficking. In an international study, researchers found that 80% of their sample of trafficked females met criteria for at least one mental health disorder and over half of these victims struggled with comorbid anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Hossain et al., 2010). Other comorbid issues may include alcohol and substance use (Basson et al., 2012; Cole et al., 2016; Cook et al., 2018; Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz, 2018; Hopper, 2017; Middleton et al., 2018; Pierce, 2012; Shaw et al., 2017), self-injurious behavior (Hopper, 2017; Reid et al., 2018), dissociation (Cole et al., 2016; Hopper, 2017), shame (Hopper, 2017), memory problems (Hopper, 2017), anger and aggression (Basson et al., 2012; ; Reid, 2018), somatic complaints (Hopper, 2017; Shaw et al., 2017), poor impulse control (Hopper, 2017), and attachment disorders (Basson et al., 2012; Hargreaves-Cormany & Patterson, 2016). Given the likelihood that mental health professionals may encounter victims of

child sex trafficking, it is necessary to have a comprehensive and universal understanding of sex trafficking in order to most effectively address victims' needs through evidence-based inventions.

There are many gaps in the literature in regards to evidence-based practices and inventions for victims of child sex trafficking. Cook et al. (2018) found that 88% of their sample of sexually exploited youth reported substance use, consequently demonstrating a great need for substance use treatment among this population. The authors argue that substance abuse treatment could potentially break the cycle of traffickers using their victims' addictions against them. Researchers have also found that youth involved in sex trafficking often have little insight into, or knowledge regarding, trafficking (Basson et al., 2012; Landers et al., 2017). For these reasons, psychoeducation on sexual exploitation in a group setting would be beneficial. Landers et al. (2017) recommended programming that reduces isolation and stigmatization by allowing victims the opportunity to interact with others that have shared experiences and traumas. Due to prevalence of suicidal and risky behaviors within this population, safety planning is another important element to incorporate into treatment (Frey et al., 2019; Hopper, 2017). Some researchers argue that evidence-based trauma therapies (e.g., Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy [TF-CBT]) may need to be modified to address the needs and problem behaviors specific to those of children involved in sex trafficking (Cole et al, 2016; Shaw et al., 2017). While TF-CBT has proven to be constructive with sexual abuse victims, this therapeutic intervention has demonstrated to be less effective with sex trafficking victims (Shaw et al., 2017). More research is needed to further illuminate the explicit needs and problem behaviors of sex trafficking victims so that current interventions can be appropriately modified.

As previously noted, mental health professionals need to remember that despite the seriousness and outcomes of their trauma, many victims may not recognize themselves as having been victims of child sex trafficking. It may be liberating for some women to have their victimization acknowledged, but for others it may feel disempowering or belittling because they do not see themselves as victims (Perkins & Ruiz, 2017). In a study on sexually-exploited American Indian youth in Minnesota, Pierce (2012) anecdotally found that some pimps, disguised as boyfriends or lovers, framed prostitution as a form of empowerment in which girls could profit from what was already being taken for free at home. This denial of victimization can present as a unique challenge for researchers, social service professionals, and/or law enforcement. Pierce (2012) found that some girls needed as long as 2 years in treatment before they were able to recognize their own victimization. Ultimately, there is great need for continued research and exploratory interventions that are tailored to address the unique needs of sex-trafficking victims.

Limitations

This exploratory study presented a variety of limitations and challenges. First, the authors were limited to the findings and information that were included in the articles. Supplementary information may have been collected and analyzed by the original authors, but not included in the final published article. Some findings may have also been excluded if the journals that published the articles had word or page limits. This may explain why some of the articles did not include basic demographics. Second, with limited research available, there also appeared to be only a limited number of researchers examining the topic of child sex trafficking. With the exception of the two articles authored by Reid (2016; 2018), no two articles had the exact same set of authors. However, there were several authors (Cole, Frey, Gattis, Hopper, Middleton,

O'Brien, Reid, Roe-Sepowitz, and Sprang) that were involved in a number of the studies. It is unclear whether the concerns addressed in this review were methodological preferences of those particular authors or actual reoccurring themes in the literature on child sex trafficking. Finally, although several electronic databases were utilized during search process, it is possible that some relevant and eligible article might have been overlooked. Consequently, if this were the case, the findings of our review may not an accurate representation of the available literature on child sex trafficking.

Conclusions

The inability to accurately identify the true degree of activity related to child sex trafficking in the United States is disconcerting. It is difficult to estimate the extent of the problem when, in addition to the covert nature of the sex trafficking industry and the reluctance of many sex trafficking to recognize their victimization, there are varying definitions, data sources, and methods utilized in literature, research, and global reports. As this study shows, many researchers are utilizing the federal definition as a starting point, but there is much need for improvement in the language of their measures. Future researcher should aim to establish an instrument to screen for child sex trafficking. To our knowledge, there is currently no widely validated screen for child sex trafficking. Researchers should also consider how they are gaining access to these victims, as social service agencies and legal services are not accessible to all sex trafficking victims. Ultimately, while the true magnitude of child sex trafficking in the United States remains unknown and the accuracy of the estimates is debatable, it is undeniable that child sex trafficking does occur and there are victims that need professional support. It is imperative that international, national, and state agencies take the initiative to collaborate on research

efforts. Future research should expand upon the existing body of research to develop a comprehensive understanding of child sex trafficking.

Conflict of Interest. None.

Note. While the term “victim” was used throughout this paper, this author recognizes that people who have experienced child sex trafficking are not defined by their trauma and may self-identify in different terms.

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