

# The Impact of Trafficking on Children: Psychological and Social Policy Perspectives

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**ABSTRACT**—*Child trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) are egregious crimes, extreme forms of child maltreatment, and major violations of children's human rights. Although empirical research is sorely lacking on the impact of such crimes on children's developmental well-being, numerous reports describe the physical and emotional trauma, humiliation, violence, degradation associated with treatment as a commodity, and unrelenting fear and abuse. This paper provides an overview of the impact of trafficking and CSE on children and the practical implications of related research in the areas of child maltreatment and victimization. Findings suggest that trafficking and CSE present grave risks to the physical, psychological, spiritual, and social-emotional development of young victims. Implications for psychology and social policy, in terms of prevention and psychosocial rehabilitation for children who have been victimized, are also presented.*

**KEYWORDS**—*child trafficking; commercial sexual exploitation; psychosocial rehabilitation; international psychology*

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Human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) are major social problems. Children are routinely sold like commodities in a multibillion dollar industry that operates with near impunity (International Labour Organization—International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour [ILO-IPEC], 2001; United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime [UNODC],

2006). CSE is the most widely recognized form of child trafficking, and because heterosexual prostitution remains the largest and most profitable form of CSE, girls are primarily affected (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2007). Two million girls ages 5–15 are initiated into the commercial sex industry each year (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2000). An increasing number of boys are also trafficked for pedophile abuse, sexual tourism, child pornography, and prostitution (IOM, 2007; Lillywhite & Skidmore, 2006). Children trafficked into one form of labor are often subsequently sold into another, as with girls who are recruited to work in factories or domestic work but who are subsequently sold into brothels. Abuse and exploitation of children who have been trafficked often go unreported, and the crimes that are reported rarely result in the prosecution of perpetrators. Traffickers, pimps, and buyers generally remain free and unpunished, whereas children are often prosecuted for illegal border crossings, being undocumented migrants, and crimes associated with prostitution (Child Rights International Network [CRIN], 2005). Because they are rarely identified as victims, the support services they desperately need are rarely provided (Farr, 2005).

Although researchers have identified several factors that place children at risk for child trafficking, they are often merely listed with no theoretical framework to guide research. The ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) is a possible framework to conceptualize risk factors associated with child trafficking because it emphasizes the relationship between people and their environment, rather than examining the characteristics of either in isolation. When applied to child trafficking, this framework could focus on child and family risk factors (e.g., victims are disproportionately female, between the ages of 12 and 16, ethnic minorities, those lacking education and vocational skills, and from marginalized social groups with fewer personal resources), characteristics of the community (socially isolated rural areas characterized by extreme poverty and economic inequality), and broader contextual variables (e.g., gender inequality and discrimination and unrelenting demand factors; Chase & Statham, 2005; Rafferty, 2007). Attitudinal factors are also linked with CSE (e.g., the

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belief that sexual intercourse with virgins reduces risks associated with HIV/AIDS; Lalor, 2004).

## DEVELOPMENTAL IMPACTS OF CHILD TRAFFICKING

Traffickers use psychological manipulations and coercive methods to maintain control over their victims and to make their escape virtually impossible by destroying their physical and psychological defenses. Reported methods include physical, sexual, and psychological violence; isolation; deployment in areas unknown to them; dependence on alcohol or drugs; controlled access to food and water; and monitoring through the use of weapons, cameras, and dogs (IOM, 2007; Zimmerman et al., 2003). Children who experience CSE confront all the dangers associated with sexual abuse; they are also subjected to routine beatings and abuse by traffickers, employers, pimps, madams, and customers. It is the extent and persistence of the psychological and physical abuse and the coercive, deceitful, and exploitative relationship with the traffickers that distinguish trafficking from other maltreatment.

Although empirical research (i.e., rigorous academic research) on the impact of trafficking on children is lacking, numerous accounts suggest that the emotional and physical trauma and unrelenting abuse and fear present a grave risk to physical, psychological, spiritual, and social-emotional development (Bertone, 2000; End Child Prostitution and Trafficking International [ECPAT], 2005, 2006a; ILO-IPEC, 2001; Scarpa, 2005). Case studies of victims suggest that CSE is “the most physically and emotionally damaging for the victim because of the persistent physical, sexual and psychological abuse that accompanies it on a daily basis” (IOM, 2007, p. 25). Some children die as a result of abuse and exploitation; others disappear (Mitchels, 2004; UNODC, 2006).

In addition to these case studies and reports, research on child maltreatment can shed light on the plight of children who are trafficked. These studies suggest a strong link between child maltreatment and maladaptive physical and psychological outcomes (Bottoms & Quas, 2006). The following sections highlight the impact on children who are trafficked, including educational deprivation, physical health problems, and emotional and behavioral issues. The sections also review related research on child maltreatment and victimization. Findings suggest that developmental theory, and particularly complex trauma theory (Briere & Spinazolla, 2005; Cook et al., 2005), may provide a useful theoretical framework to guide our understanding of how trafficking affects children. Children who have been exposed to complex trauma, such as prolonged physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect, violence, and torture, are at increased risk for a number of symptoms and behavioral characteristics, including attachment, biological integrity, emotional regulation, dissociative adaptations, behavior, cognitive functioning, and self-concept.

## Educational Deprivation

Children who are trafficked are robbed of the few educational opportunities available to them and, thus, a chance to improve their future economic situation. Related research has identified adverse outcomes of educational deprivation among victims of neglect (psychological and emotional) and abuse (physical and sexual). Outcomes include developmental delays, language and cognitive difficulties, deficits in verbal and memory skills, poorer academic performance, and grade retention (e.g., Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993; Friedrich, Einbender, & Luecke, 1983; Gaudin, 1999; Kendall-Tackett & Eckenrode, 1996).

## Physical Health Problems

Victims of child trafficking experience inhumane living conditions, inadequate diet and hygiene, beatings and abuse, neglect, and denial of their basic human rights to health care and protection, resulting in lasting health problems (ECPAT, 2006a; ILO-IPEC, 2001). Victims of CSE are further threatened by unsafe sexual practices, heightening risks of unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, complications from frequent high-risk pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS (ECPAT, 2006b; Mitchels, 2004; UNFPA, 2000). HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases are prevalent among children who have been trafficked (ECPAT, 2005; Scarpa, 2005). Related research has also identified a number of adverse health outcomes for children who have been abused, maltreated, and victimized (Malinosky-Rummell & Hansen, 1993; Sneddon, 2003).

## Emotional Well-Being

The experiences associated with trafficking can lead to lasting psychological challenges. Children experience physical and emotional trauma associated with removal from their families, homes, and communities; their subsequent encounters involve substantial harm through physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Mitchels, 2004). Although empirical studies have not assessed the psychological impact of child trafficking, case studies have reported adverse emotional effects among trafficked children, including depression, hopelessness, guilt, shame, flashbacks, nightmares, loss of confidence, lower self-esteem, and anxiety (ECPAT, 2006a). The negative messages they routinely receive can influence their sense of worth, leading to feelings of self-blame (ECPAT, 2006a).

Empirical research on child maltreatment has identified numerous adverse consequences for victims. Psychological abuse associated with ongoing threats, isolation, and witnessing the abuse of others negatively affects self-concept, personal goals, and relationships with others, and seriously jeopardizes emotional well-being (Hart & Brassard, 1987; Sneddon, 2003). Emotional and physical neglect are associated with social and emotional withdrawal (Bousha & Twentyman, 1984), behavioral problems (Watts-English, Forston, Gibler, Hooper,

& DeBellis, 2006), and lower self-esteem, confidence, and assertiveness (Egeland, Sroufe, & Erickson, 1983). Children who experience physical and sexual abuse are more likely to experience adverse emotional outcomes, including anxiety and depression, lower self-esteem, social isolation, symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, and suicide (Dykman et al., 1997; Kaufman, 1991; Nelson et al., 2002; Sneddon, 2003). Sexually abused children can suffer severe psychological ramifications, such as PTSD and depression (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 2001). Finally, multiple experiences of victimization during childhood increase risk for mental illness (Read, 1997) and psychiatric difficulties in adults who were victimized as children (Edwards, Holden, Felitti, & Anda, 2003; Horwitz, Widom, Loughlin, & White, 2001; Widom, 1999).

### Behavioral Outcomes

Adverse behavioral outcomes, including attachment difficulties, mistrust of adults, antisocial behaviors, and difficulties relating to others, have been reported among children who were trafficked (ECPAT, 2006a). Although empirical studies have not been conducted, several reports suggest that CSE is a risk factor for sexualized behavior, and that some adolescents may turn to prostitution or other sexual activity because they feel worthless, that their lives have been spoiled, and that they have nothing left to lose (ECPAT, 2006a). Mitchels (2004) reports that some younger children resort to self-harm to regain a sense of control through pain, whereas older children detach themselves from the harsh realities they have endured by abusing alcohol or drugs.

Research has linked hostile and aggressive behavior in children who were physically abused to the aggressive manner in which they are treated (Kaplan, Pelcovitz, & Labruna, 1999; Prino & Peyrot, 1994). Children who were physically or sexually abused experience suicidal behaviors, emotional problems, and difficulties relating to their peers (Sneddon, 2003). They are also at greater risk for substance abuse (Arellano, 1996). Adults who were neglected as children are at increased risk for violence, antisocial behavior, and related problems (Widom & White, 1998).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL POLICY

Building a protective environment for children will require governments to acknowledge that trafficking is a violation of human rights (CRIN, 2005; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2005), and that abuses associated with CSE are rooted in the marginalization of women, gender-based discrimination, and patriarchal structures that do not condone the commercialization of women and girls (Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) & UNICEF, 2005; Shifman, 2003). The field of psychology can play an important role in advancing this agenda.

In view of the dire consequences associated with trafficking, developing, implementing, and evaluating prevention programs are critical. Psychological research and consultation could focus on promoting gender equality in countries with higher rates of child trafficking (Haspels & Suriyasam, 2003), the role of men and boys in creating and maintaining demand (Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2004), and effective uses of media to create awareness and to combat child trafficking and related issues associated with CSE, including HIV and AIDS. The field could share research with governments and others on methods of changing prevailing social norms and attitudes; the importance of high-quality education for all children, including ethnic minorities and those with disabilities, which can help ensure the economic empowerment of children in high-risk settings; and successful programs that mitigate the impact of poverty on children (McLoyd, 1998). To ensure that girls become contributing members of their communities with full economic, social, and political participation, gender biases in school curriculum must be removed and a curriculum developed that is human rights based and gender sensitive. Schools in high-risk settings might also benefit from curriculum that includes information on trafficking and sexual health. The field of psychology could also be involved in training teachers, parents, and community members in appropriate skills to combat trafficking and other offenses. Finally, the field could help develop social policies and procedures for gathering and maintaining statistical data disaggregated by age and gender, and data on those who are involved in child trafficking and CSE, either as victims or as perpetrators.

Psychologists with interests in social policy could work with governments and others to ensure that effective prevention programs are developed and implemented that address both demand factors and those who benefit from exploiting children. Adequate and appropriate legal procedures are needed in every country to ensure that those who profit from child slavery are brought to justice (CRIN, 2005; IPU & UNICEF, 2005; UNODC, 2006). Under no circumstances should children who have been trafficked subjected to criminal procedures or sanctions. The number of member states that have ratified and enforced key international documents must increase, and criminal and related laws must be strengthened and enforced (Goodey, 2004; IPU & UNICEF, 2005; Scarpa, 2005).

Psychology can also play an important role in the recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration of children who have been trafficked. First and foremost is the need to establish data collection and reporting procedures to rapidly identify victims. We must also develop cooperative efforts to facilitate the timely return of children to their communities. Young victims should be immediately reunited with their families, unless consultation with the child and an assessment of risk suggests this is not in the child's best interest. If children cannot be safely reunited, appropriate arrangement for their care should be made. Specialized interventions programs must be developed, implemented,

and evaluated to effectively address the physical, psychological, social, and educational needs of children who have been trafficked and facilitate their reintegration into their families, schools, and communities (IPU & UNICEF, 2005; United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, 2002; UNICEF, 2005). Children who have been exposed to complex trauma might benefit from a comprehensive assessment that could guide the provision of mental health intervention services. Research could examine how developmental outcomes associated with child trafficking compare with those experienced by children who are otherwise traumatized (e.g., by war, natural disasters, genocide, and other forms of civil war conflict) and the specific mechanisms by which trafficking affects functioning. Research on these issues could draw on complex trauma theory, additive risk models, and ecological theory to make predictions about similarities and differences.

It is hard to imagine conducting prospective research, but on the basis of retrospective report, research could focus on risk and protective factors, including the child's age, gender, and personal history; characteristics and duration of the trauma exposure; and the role of mediating factors, such as the availability of social supports, parental emotional functioning, and the child's resilience and coping skills. Qualitative research would allow victims to share their experiences so that we might learn about the types of support and protection services that children need. Psychological research could also address effective techniques for interviewing victims of trafficking.

Psychologists with expertise in child development can also contribute to research, social policy, and practice by exploring the range of assistance needed by victims of child trafficking. These include proper identification and protection from further physical and psychological harm, referral and reintegration assistance, cooperation with law enforcement authorities, and the essential components of successful reintegration programs (e.g., safety measures, effective communication strategies, education, specialized health services, psychological counseling, information on human rights, and legal support; Bjerkan, Dyrliid, Nikolic-Ristanovic, & Simeunovic-Patic, 2005; ECPAT, 2006a, 2006b; IOM, 2007; Mitchels, 2004). Additional focus is needed to address unique concerns in specific countries, including India (Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 2005a, 2005b), Southeast Asia (Asia Against Child Trafficking, 2006), and Europe (UNICEF, 2006). For example, researchers and practitioners in these and other countries may find helpful the numerous empirical studies that examine the effectiveness of psychosocial interventions for child victims of maltreatment, violence exposure, and trauma in helping children recover from the potentially harmful mental health effects (Chadwick Center for Children and Families, 2004; Cohen, Mannarino, Murray, & Igelman, 2006; Toth & Cicchetti, 2006). The field of psychology might work with governments and others to develop and implement victim

support programs on the basis of empirical research and existing models of good practice established for other forms of child maltreatment. Challenges remain, however, in offering mental health services in non-Western areas that do not share the same historical and cultural backgrounds (Toi, Jordans, Regmi, & Sharma, 2005). This is also an important area for future research.

Finally, given the multidimensional effects of trafficking on an individual's health, psychologists could be involved with other interventions that are part of the reintegration process. A multidisciplinary service approach to recovery would recognize that the emotional well-being of an individual or group can be affected by acting on the social factors that surround them (IOM, 2007). A psychosocial approach could focus on the link between social-community and cultural factors and individual emotional well-being and include interventions that target the child's family situation and home environment, the child's educational and vocational needs, health problems, communities, and the broader culture and society (ECPAT, 2006a, 2007; Elliot & Urquiza, 2006; Zimmerman et al., 2003). For example, children with health problems, including those with HIV and AIDS, need specialized treatments that are culturally appropriate and their caregivers need the necessary resources to ensure their proper care (e.g., financial, educational, health, and psychosocial support).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Because of its global dimensions, we must make a concerted international effort to stop the sale of children. Psychological research on child maltreatment and victimization speaks to the negative impact of trafficking and CSE on children (Toth & Cicchetti, 2006). It also provides guidance for a number of practice areas (e.g., child interviewing, treatment for childhood PTSD, and treatment of sexually reactive behavior; Bottoms & Quas, 2006). However, because child maltreatment has generally been viewed more as a clinical issue requiring diagnosis and treatment and less as a social problem (Chaffin, 2006), much remains to be done to better understand the ecological, contextual, and international factors associated with child trafficking and CSE. Effective solutions will require the development, implementation, and evaluation of strategies to prevent child slavery as well as psychosocial programs to address the needs of those who have been trafficked. At the very least, we owe this to our children.

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