

Trends and New Directions in the Law Enforcement Response to the Sex Trafficking of Minors: A Nationally Representative Study (LEA-CST)

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Principal Investigator:

Kimberly J. Mitchell, PhD, Crimes against Children Research Center, UNH

Co-Investigators:

David Finkelhor, PhD, Crimes against Children Research Center, UNH; Lisa M. Jones, PhD, Crimes against Children Research Center, UNH; Jennifer O'Brien, PhD, Department of Social Work, UNH; Michele Harmon, PhD, Westat; and Bradley Russ, National Criminal Justice Training Center at Fox Valley Technical College

Background

There has been a growing consensus that law enforcement needs to change its traditional approach to child sex trafficking (CST) from a predominately delinquent perspective to a more victim-centered approach. This study will evaluate the degree to which law enforcement has been changing practices by replicating an earlier national study on police investigations of CST. The 2005 National Juvenile Prostitution Study (N-JPS) looked at the law enforcement handling of a nationally representative sample of cases involving juvenile victims of commercial sexual exploitation, obtaining details from investigators about arrests, detention, charges, referrals and police investigations.^{1,2} The new study will gather information from a similarly designed sample of police investigations to analyze trends over a 15-year period for these cases, and to identify the degree to which law enforcement is responding to involved youth as victims. It will also gather information from investigators about challenges and barriers to addressing these cases in a way that provides youth victims with needed services. This data will be supplemented with key informant interviews with community agencies who work with CST victims in a sub-sample of areas where police response has been particularly successful in implementing a victim-centered approach.

Goals of the study

The overall goal of the National Law Enforcement Agency Child Sex trafficking (LEA_CST) Study is to assess and document the extent that law enforcement has been changing practices to child sex trafficking investigations from a delinquency-oriented response to a victim-centered approach.^{3,4}

Specific objectives of LEA-CST are to:

- Assess the overall numbers of CST cases that came to the attention of law enforcement in 2019 including those involving arrests, detentions, and alternatives to arrest.
- Describe law enforcement progress toward and barriers encountered in adopting a victim-centered response for juveniles involved in sex trafficking.
- Examine whether there are ethnic, racial or sexual minority subgroups of youth who are disproportionately represented among sex trafficking arrests.
- Translate findings to inform CST training programs.

Methodology

The core methodology will consist of four phases:

1. A Pilot Phase involving a review, refinement, and testing of the survey instruments in collaboration with an Expert Advisory Group (EAG) consisting of advocates, practitioners, survivors, and law enforcement investigators. To further refine the survey instruments, this phase will also entail interviews with a purposive sample of community agency key informants to identify crucial police and community policy issues. This will be followed with a pilot test of the revised mail survey with 100 LEAs.

2. A National Law Enforcement Agency-Level Mail Survey Phase which involves a mail survey with a nationally representative sample of 3,000 LEAs to determine which had CST cases that ended with arrests, detentions, or diversions during 2019.
3. A Case-Level Telephone Survey Phase involving telephone interviews with investigators about the characteristics of specific cases (N=1,000) reported in the mail surveys.
4. A Translation Phase to integrate current study findings into existing CST training programs for LEAs.

Impact of the study

1. Provide a national picture of law enforcement responses to child sex trafficking in 2019.
2. Provide national statistics about the number of cases, breakdown across at-risk populations, and the circumstances of the victims that can be widely used by advocates and policy makers in informing the public and allocating resources.
3. Provide a community-level perspective on police practice and collaboration with victim-serving agencies.
4. Identify whether there are important changes in offender demographics or methods.
5. Identify where law enforcement efforts may be yielding some positive effects.
6. Inform the development of up-to-date training for law enforcement on child sex trafficking.
7. Identify the major barriers to greater law enforcement effectiveness in dealing with these crimes.

References

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