

A Baseline Assessment of Human Trafficking in the State of Wisconsin

Wisconsin Department of Justice, September 6, 2013

Complete report at: <http://www.doj.state.wi.us/sites/default/files/2013-news/wisconsin-human-trafficking-assesment-2013.pdf>

KEY FINDINGS

- Human trafficking exists in Wisconsin. It takes the form of both sex trafficking and labor trafficking, and it is committed against both adults and minors.
- Most of the human trafficking cases reported occur in areas of the state that are highly populated and have a significant tourist or visitor population.
- Early intervention is critical for helping victims or potential victims leave or avoid a life of trafficking.
- There is a lack of adequate services for victims of human trafficking throughout the state. The most notable services needed are adequate housing, healthcare, and advocacy.
- Progress has been made in multiple areas of the state to address the lack of adequate services for victims of human trafficking.
- Further training on human trafficking is needed by law enforcement and other professionals who may encounter this type of activity.
- Reporting and collecting accurate statistics on this topic is difficult. Though some agencies in the last two years have begun tracking this type of activity, not all agencies keep statistics under a label of “human trafficking.” Further, even those who keep human trafficking statistics may not be able to easily differentiate between cases that involved minors and cases that only involved adults. For purposes of this assessment, respondents were asked to provide reasonable estimates if necessary.

OTHER FINDINGS

- Though not delineated in the initial survey, interviews revealed that sex trafficking is typically focused on as the most prevalent type of human trafficking in Wisconsin communities. Most interviewees noted that their focus is on child sex trafficking. This is likely partially due to the legal definitions of human trafficking under Wisconsin law. Child prostitution is equivalent to human trafficking under the law, whereas to make a case for human trafficking with adult prostitution, the prosecution must prove force, fraud, or coercion, which is often difficult. Another aspect of the focus on child sex trafficking is that children are seen as more vulnerable than adults, and therefore require more attention from law enforcement to intervene on their behalf. It should be noted, however, that many adult trafficking victims were introduced to trafficking at an average age between 12 and 14 years.
- Anecdotally, labor trafficking is certainly present, but often goes unnoticed or not officially investigated because of lack of resources, lack of training, or inability to investigate due to the transient nature of the crime.

FINDINGS REGARDING CUSTOMERS AND THE COMMUNITY

- Officials in some highly-populated areas that recognize a trafficking problem have been working with local non-profit service organizations to educate the community in addition to providing services to victims. One detective interviewed stated that the population at large is very unaware of the human trafficking—both sex trafficking and forced labor—occurring in his jurisdiction. He says the general population is particularly misinformed about the reality of sex trafficking.

FINDINGS REGARDING VICTIM SERVICES

- Highlighting the lack of appropriate shelter for trafficking victims, one local detective reported that a victim she had been working with in a sex trafficking case called her in the middle of the night, frantic and asking for help. She needed to get out of her location immediately, she said, because “the gang was after her.” She was more than three hundred miles away from the detective’s jurisdiction, on the outskirts of a major US city. On another occasion, the detective described having to convince a women’s shelter to temporarily house a 17-year-old victim as she was too young to stay there under the shelter’s rules.
- In order to make housing effective for victims, it has also been suggested that a facility needs to be a place where victims will want to stay and can feel understood. This will lessen the chances of them leaving the facility, feeling that they are better off on their own.
- Other gaps exist, such as the need for advocates and/or case managers to ensure that human trafficking victims know how to access the services that *are* available to them. Interviewees provided information on several NGOs in Wisconsin that are developing such advocacy programs. Some have suggested that making treatment and counseling programs mandatory for victims is the only way they have a chance at staying out of the trafficking world.
- Because of the nature of all forms of trafficking, quality health care is a necessary service to provide to victims. Not only are many victims potentially exposed to disease as part of their victimization, but all types of victims are often prevented from seeking medical care for any need. Five percent of survey respondents indicated that victims were referred to health care services.
- Of those who responded to the survey, 22.5 percent indicated that victims of human trafficking were referred to counseling or treatment. This shows that officials who come into contact with trafficked victims are offering services they are aware of and able to provide. However, as many interviewees have noted, having counseling staff that are trained to deal with trafficking victims is extremely important, and is somewhat uncommon throughout Wisconsin. Even social service providers need and are requesting additional training on engaging victims of human trafficking.
- As it concerns domestic trafficking issues, several interviewees indicated a need for education in schools, emphasizing that this education needs to start by middle school, because anything after that is too late.
- (U) Many victims encountered by interviewees have grown up in circumstances that make them ripe for victimization of all types, including human trafficking. “For them,” says one respondent, “it’s not unusual for their peer group to contain adults. The kids are usually introduced to trafficking by a relative or a friend of a friend...it’s someone that’s just around in their neighborhood, not someone they see as a ‘bad guy.’”

CHALLENGES REMAIN

- A reoccurring theme among cases is that victims typically do not come forward for help from authorities, and generally do not want to give information even once arrested and/or separated from their traffickers. For the most part, victims are afraid of their traffickers due to the many threats that have been made against them or their families.
- In many instances, particularly in forced labor cases, victims have described that their lives while being trafficked were still better than whatever situation they left at home, and therefore were compliant. Tied in to this attitude is a lack of knowing where to go for help. Most trafficking victims believe that going to the police will only land them in jail, deported, or in a worse circumstance than staying with their traffickers.
- Language barriers are often a problem for local departments, especially when they encounter tight-knit communities whose culture is one of non-cooperation with authorities. Some departments have bi-lingual officers on staff that cover their needs, while others lack the resources to solve this problem effectively.
- Victims of child sex trafficking in Wisconsin are truly vulnerable victims in that their lives with traffickers often seem more desirable than their lives before they met one. Victims often come from broken homes and abusive situations. They may receive food more regularly with their traffickers than at home. They may receive gifts on occasion. They do not see their trafficker as a criminal offender, but rather believe inaccurately that he or she is a person who actually loves them—something so many of them have never known. Therefore, they do not see themselves as victims, but instead are groomed and manipulated into believing that they are a valued part of a “family.” They are children that are often-drug addicted and rely on their traffickers to supply them. Survival skills that kept the victims alive as children often lead them to criminality in the adult mainstream world.
- Lack of manpower and funding, as well as the limited availability of help when needed, were also listed as challenges that face law enforcement. For local departments, when evidence exists outside of their jurisdiction, the availability of help from state or local law enforcement is limited to “solvability” factors of each case, and whether they have the time to investigate promptly.

SOME NUMBERS

WI human trafficking incidents

- 87% - Respondents reported that human trafficking happens sometimes, often or all the time
- 58% - Respondents agreed or strongly agreed that human trafficking is increasing each year
- 58% - Respondents agreed or strongly agreed that human trafficking often occurs in rural areas, i.e., counties with less than 50,000 population
- 65% - Respondents agreed or strongly agreed that human trafficking is more prevalent in urban areas, i.e., counties with greater than 50,000 population
- 20% - Respondents reported investigating 1-5 cases of human trafficking involving minors during previous 24 months

- 13% - Prosecuted cases in counties investigating 1-5 cases of human trafficking involving minors in preceding 24 months
- 76% - Respondents were unaware of human trafficking cases involving minors in their jurisdiction
- 15% - Respondents reported investigating 1-5 cases of human trafficking involving adults
- 82% - Respondents were unaware of human trafficking cases involving adults in their jurisdiction
- 10% - Prosecuted cases in counties investigating 1-5 cases of human trafficking involving adults in preceding 24 months

Referral to victim services

- 15% - Respondents who referred victims to counseling
- 7% - Respondents who referred victims to treatment
- 7% - Respondents who referred victims for health care
- 2% - Respondents did not refer to services as none were available
- 18% - Respondents did not refer to services as none were available
- 63% - Respondents were unaware of any human trafficking victims in their jurisdiction
- 8% - Respondents who reported cases to social service agencies or to law enforcement
- 23% - Respondents who did not report cases to social service agencies or to law enforcement