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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# DOMESTIC MINOR SEX TRAFFICKING: THE EXPLOITATION OF OUR MOST VULNERABLE POPULATION

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### ABSTRACT

The problem of *child sex trafficking* is widespread and commonly receives media attention as it pertains to international sex trafficking. However, commercial sexual exploitation of children is one of the most hidden forms of child sexual abuse in the United States today (Clawson and Goldblatt Grace, 2007; Kotrla, 2010, in O'Brien, White, and Rizo, 2017, p. 265). The problem is occurring in our backyard, yet very little is known about the extent of the issue. Until recently, minors involved in sex crimes were treated as criminals rather than victims. The passage of the *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* (TVPA) of 2000 changed that. The purpose of this review of the literature is to identify the issue of domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST), including the risk factors, consequences, and needs that arise for the minors such as physical, medical, and psychological support. DMST victims are under-identified. Once identified, the *victims* and *survivors* have limited supports to meet their needs. This study provides a review of existing qualitative and quantitative research on the topic of DMST with implications for future research including how the presence or absence of risk factors relate to DMST, establishing screening protocols for multi-disciplinary teams to increase early identification of victims or at-risk minors, and establishing the needs of trafficked minors during captivity and after being rescued. The review of the literature will benefit service providers in the juvenile justice system, social services, the medical field, as well as educators who are the people most often in contact with the young victims described.

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## INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking is an international issue that has reached epidemic proportions. It takes on different forms, the most common being forced labor which includes *sex trafficking* (see Table 1 for definitions of terms) and forced marriage according to the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2018). Women and children are the most common victims of sex trafficking. This study will focus on the sexual victimization of our most vulnerable population, children. Specifically, through this review, we intend to bring to light the issue of domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST). The passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) identified sex trafficking as a grave violation of federal law. The TVPA defines *domestic minor sex trafficking* (DMST) as the commercial sexual exploitation of American children within U.S. borders. It is the 'recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act' where the person is a U.S. citizen or

lawful permanent resident under the age of 18 years. The age of the victim is the critical issue – there is no requirement to prove force, fraud, or coercion was used to secure the victim's actions. (p. 8) Domestic minor sex trafficking exploits our most vulnerable population—children.

**Researcher Positionality** This critical review is an effort to present the issue of domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) with a strong influence from lived experiences and informed positionalities: the first author as a former investigator with the Department of Family and Protective Services who works as a public-school educator; the second author as a professor of education who has incorporated service-learning in her courses to assist children who have been sexually abused and are often deprived of food and education, locally and internationally. Both authors are survivors of child sexual abuse. Both can check off the boxes of many of the risk factors associated with DMST victimization, and both have experienced the life-long consequences. But both believe it is important to demonstrate that, in spite of risk factors (see Table 2. Victims of DMST Risk Factors and Consequences), children who have been victimized can escape the dark path of sex trafficking.

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Although victims of child sexual abuse may end up in trafficking situations, it is even more important to explore what can be done to identify victims or at-risk youth early on to avoid them having to navigate that dangerous path. Because both authors are currently working in a U.S.-Mexico border region, the search included this demographic region.

## METHODS

To conduct a thorough review of the academic literature for the present study, various databases were searched. For the initial search, the articles were limited to include only full-text, peer-reviewed journals published between the years 2015 January through 2018 March. The original search terms were “sexual assault” OR “human trafficking” AND “Mexico” (see Table 3. Audit Trail of Database Searches). The initial search yielded 133 results in WorldCat. From scanning though some of the 133 articles the terms “sex trafficking” was a common keyword and a new search was conducted to include the connector AND with the search term “sex trafficking” since the focus of the study was intended to be on women or children victims of sex trafficking. The results decreased to 31. While scanning the 31 results the term “domestic minor sex trafficking” (DMST) was prevalent in the resulting articles. A new search was conducted with “domestic minor sex trafficking” as the only search term. The results were 56 articles. With the inclusion of the connector AND with the search term “Mexico” the results were reduced to 11 in WorldCat. The reason for including “Mexico” as a search term was to limit results to the U.S.-Mexican border and to include legal residents who are originally from Mexico. However, it should be noted the resulting articles made no mention of country of origin of legal residents. The sources not chosen were either (a) a review of a book, (b) the full text was not available and a request for it was unsuccessful, (c) repeated in the results, (d) not a study, (e) inclusive of adult female sex workers, (f) included adult women working Mumbai red light district, or (g) the link led to a new search for an article that was not found. The second search was conducted on the EBSCO database limited to full-text, peer-reviewed journals published between 2015 January through 2018 March. The search term was “domestic minor sex trafficking” and yielded 13 articles. The articles excluded were (a) book reviews, (b) full text was not available, (c) no mention of DMST, and (d) those previously found on World Cat.

The final search was done on SAGE database. Again, the search was limited to full-text, peer-reviewed journals published between 2015 January through 2018 March. The search term was “domestic minor sex trafficking” and yielded 17 results. The articles excluded for this literature review were (a) those previously found through the other databases, (b) including adult women, or (c) made no reference to DMST. Additional relevant sources were found through web searches of federal laws pertaining to DMST (e.g., Safe Harbor Policy). (See Table 3. Audit Trail of Database Searches.)

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In 2015, the United States was one of the top three origin countries of sex trafficking victims within the United States along with Mexico and the Philippines (Twigg, 2017). Domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) is also referred to as *commercial sexual exploitation of children* (CSEC), but for the purpose of this study, the term DMST will be used. “Commercial sexual exploitation of children is one of the most

hidden forms of child sexual abuse in the United States today” (Clawson and Goldblatt Grace, 2007; Kotrla, 2010, in O’Brien, White, and Rizo, 2017, p. 265). While the existing literature cites various estimates, the exact number of DMST victims is unknown. In 2010, the U.S. Department of State estimated that between 100,000 and 300,000 children were lured into DMST (Perkins and Ruiz, 2017, p. 172). Estimates are gathered from various sources including reports from state juvenile justice systems, reports of alleged human trafficking of children from states that have included it as a reportable child abuse offense, and data from the National Human Trafficking Resource Center hotline. “The National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH) is a national, anti—trafficking hotline and resource center serving victims and survivors of human trafficking and the anti-trafficking community in the United States.” (NHTH, 2018). Youth victims of sex trafficking are targeted in various ways. *Traffickers* target at-risk youth by courting them, isolating them from friends and family, and eventually by introducing them to the world of prostitution. The traffickers will exploit the trust and love the young victims have developed for them and take advantage of those feelings to convince their victims that by prostituting themselves they will be helping the object of their affection. Once the young victims are being prostituted, the traffickers begin to control them by beating them, insulting them, and taking their money, making them dependent on their trafficker for their most basic needs (Smith, 2013).

Traffickers tend to target specific youth they find easy to manipulate. There are many risk factors that make pretty much all youth susceptible to trafficking, but the most targeted individuals tend to be (a) those with a history of abuse, (b) those with a history of involvement with social services and/or the juvenile justice system, (c) runaways, and (d) those in foster care or group homes (refer to Table 3). Youth victimized in their homes mostly suffer from physical or sexual abuse by a parent or step-parent. When the abuse becomes too much to bear, the victims look to escape the situation by running away because they feel that living on the streets will be better than continuing to suffer at the hands of those who are supposed to protect them (Havlicek, Huston, Boughton, and Zhang, 2016). When the caregiver at home is the perpetrator, runaways tend to look at their traffickers as the person who will save and protect them from future abuse. Often, family social services and the juvenile justice system get involved with the families of abused and runaway youth. If sexual abuse is not suspected, the families will usually be provided with behavior-focused case management services and the systems will fail to identify potential victims of sex trafficking (Sprang and Cole, 2018). In the first author’s experience as an investigator with the Department of Family and Protective Services, it was common practice to conduct a thorough assessment of the family situation regardless of the allegations. By conducting a thorough investigation of the family dynamics, issues that had not been reported would come to light allowing for more appropriate services to be provided to the families. However, due to the overwhelming amount of cases reported for investigation, it is easy to see how red flags may be overlooked especially when caseworkers have a limited amount of time to spend with the families. Familial sex trafficking is also a very common way of sex trafficking youth. Biological parents as perpetrators of abuse and neglect account for the majority of sexual abuse allegations of underage victims according to a 2014 report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families,

**Table 1. Terms and Definitions Related to Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking (DMST)**

Term	Definition	Reference
<i>chronic runaways</i>	Children who run away four times or more.	O'Brien, White, & Rizo, 2017, p. 173
<i>coercion</i>	Threats of serious harm to of physical restraint against any person; any scheme, plan, or pattern intended to cause a person to believe that failure to perform an act would result in serious harm to or physical restraint against any person; or the abuse or threatened abuse of the legal process.	Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000. Public Law 106-386-Oct. 28, 2000,Sec. 103.2.
<i>commercial sex act</i>	Any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person.	Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000. Public Law 106-386-Oct. 28, 2000,Sec. 103.3.
<i>Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)</i>	Also referred to as domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST).	Bounds, Julion, & Delaney, 2015, p. 17
<i>Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking (DMST)</i>	Commercial sexual exploitation of children is one of the most hidden forms of child sexual abuse in the United States today (Clawson & Goldblatt Grace, 2007; Kotrla, 2010, in O'Brien, White, &Rizo, 2017, p. 265). It includes sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is inducted by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age (TVPA, 2000, p. 8). It also includes the exchange or acceptance of sex acts to meet one's basic needs (e.g., food or shelter) (Fong & Berger-Cardoso, 2010).	O'Brien, White, &Rizo, 2017, pp. 265-266 Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000. Public Law 106-386-Oct. 28, 2000, Sec. 103.8A.
<i>grooming process</i>	When traffickers befriend and exploit the victims.	Bounds, Julion, & Delaney, 2015,p. 18
<i>john/trafficker</i>	According to the TVPA, the "john" is considered to be the person who "causes" a child to engage in a commercial sex act when she or he buys sex from a child (Adelson, 2008; Smith & Vardaman, 2010). Therefore, any john who causes a child to engage in sex acts for money is considered a trafficker (Adelson,2008; Smith & Vardaman, 2010).	O'Brien, White, &Rizo, 2017, p. 266
<i>residential treatment centers</i>	An organization whose primary purpose is the provision of individually planned programs of mental health treatment, other than acute inpatient care, in conjunction with residential care for seriously emotionally disturbed children and youth, ages 17 and younger (The American Association of Children's Residential Centers, 1999, p. 1)	Twigg, 2017, p. 260
<i>sex trafficking</i>	The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for a commercial sex act.	Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000. Public Law 106-386-Oct. 28, 2000, Sec. 103.9.
<i>sexual abuse</i>	May include sexual penetration, sexual exploitation, sexual molestation, substantial risk of sexual injury, or human trafficking of children.	Bounds, Julion, & Delaney, 2015, p. 17
<i>survival sex</i>	Engaging in sexual activities to obtain the most basic of necessities for survival; one form of sex trafficking.	O'Brien, White, &Rizo, 2017, p. 172
<i>survivors</i>	Individuals who have survived violence and are no longer being victimized.	O'Brien, White, &Rizo, 2017, p. 265
<i>United States as defined by Public Law 106-386</i>	The fifty States of the United States, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and the territories and possessions of the United States.	Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000. Public Law 106-386-Oct. 28, 2000,Sec. 103.12.
<i>victims</i>	Individuals who are still being subjected to violence or are being victimized.	O'Brien, White, &Rizo, 2017, p.265

Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau (Bounds, Julion, and Delaney, 2015). If parents are substance abusers, they often allow perpetrators to engage in sexual activities with their underage children as a form of payment for their drugs. They may also purposely have their children involved in prostitution as a way of making ends meet and/or as a way of funding their illegal drug usage. This illegal activity can cause the victims to resort to illegal drug use themselves as a way of coping with the abuse, making them more vulnerable to further victimization. Traffickers, in this case, the parents, may also use drugs and alcohol as a way of controlling the victims and getting them to comply with their demands. Foster children and those placed in group homes are also often targeted by traffickers. Smith (2013) tells of a situation in her book, *Renting Lacy*, of a pimp who purposely targeted young girls residing in a group home. The girls were invited to a party where they were drugged and raped by a group of boys from their school's wrestling team. The man who later became their pimp charged each boy twenty dollars to have sex with the inebriated and passed out young girls. The following day, he humiliated the girls by telling them they were *hoes* (colloquial for *whores*), and nobody would want them due to what they had done the night before. The girls, too scared and ashamed to return to their placement, stayed with their trafficker; and so began their lives as sex trafficking victims.

Stories like this are not uncommon at all. In fact, this scenario is very similar to what occurred with one of the first author's ex-students, Janie (a pseudonym). Janie was a 13-year-old girl whose mother was suspected of being a prostitute. Janie would talk about how she was often not allowed to go into her home until late in the evening because her mother would kick her out. Although she never disclosed the fact that her mother was a prostitute, there was a strong suspicion by faculty and administration. The family was involved with social services, and, as a result, no further reports were made by anybody in the school. Janie was eventually removed from her mother's care and placed in a foster home from which she ran away on the first night. She was eventually found and placed in a local children's shelter where she talked about how she and her friend *allowed* twenty men to pay them for sex in a brushy area off of a highway. The girls were taken for medical evaluations and it was found that they had recently engaged in sexual intercourse and they both tested positive for a sexually transmitted disease (STD). Today, Janie is a mother of two at the age of sixteen (personal communication). Like Janie, many girls who are victimized often end up pregnant and/or with sexually transmitted diseases. Those are just two of many potential consequences (see Table 3). Victims of domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) must oblige to what the *johns* want and that is often unprotected sex. Because the victims are forced to practice unprotected sex, the young girls become

**Table 2. Victims of DMST Risk Factors and Consequences**

Risk Factors for DMST	Consequences of DMST
Age	Imposed Effects
• Demand for young female virgins	• Confinement
	• Isolation
	• Threats
Dysfunctional families	Physical effects
• Domestic violence	• Death
• Parental substance abuse	• Dizziness
	• Fatigue
History of Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement	• Gang rapes
• Further abuse	• Headaches
• Instability that leads to inability to develop healthy relationships with peers	• Long-term health issues
• Multiple placements	• Malnutrition
History of maltreatment	• Neglect
• Neglect	• Pain
• Physical abuse	• Physical assault
• Sexual abuse	• Severe violence
History of running away	• Unsafe sex
• Chronic runaways	Exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
• Resorting to prostitution for survival	• Gynecological infections
Homelessness	• High-risk pregnancies
I	• Lack of contraceptive use
inappropriate placements	• Unsafe abortions
• Juvenile detention centers	• Untreated medical conditions
• Returned to homes they have run away from	Psychological and behavioral effects
Juvenile justice involvement	• Antisocial behaviors
• Adjudicated for sexual violence	• Anxiety and stress disorder
Lack of education	• Attachment disorders
	• Conduct disorder
Lack of knowledge of legal rights	• Depression
	• Deficits in verbal and memory skills
LBGTI individuals	• Developmental delays
	• Difficulty relating to others
Little to no adult supervision	• Dissociative disorder
• Foster care	• Eating disorder
• Homeless	• Hopelessness
• Runaways	• Language and cognitive difficulties
Living in proximity to high-risk areas	• Loss of self-confidence
• Adult markets of prostitution	• Low self-esteem
• Areas where transient men are frequently seen	• Mistrust of adults
• Impoverished areas	• Panic attacks
• International borders	• Personality disorders
• Low IQ	• Poor academic performance
Mental health disorders	• PTSD
	• Self-destructive behaviors
Placement outside of their home	• Self-injury
	• Sleep disorders
Poverty	• Substance abuse disorders
Substance use/abuse	Forced to used rugs
	• Suicidal ideations

Sources: Goldberg, Moore, Houck, Kaplan, & Barron, 2017; O'Brien, Givens, & Leibowitz, 2017; O'Brien, White, & Rizo, 2017; Perkins, & Ruiz, 2017; Twigg, 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2009.

**Table 3. Audit Trail of Database Searches**

Database	Dates Reviewed	Search Terms	Sources Found	Relevant Sources
World Cat	2015-2018	"sexual assault" OR "human trafficking" AND Mexico	133	N/A 0
World Cat	2015-2018	"sexual assault" OR "human trafficking" AND "Mexico" AND "sex trafficking"	31	N/A 0
World Cat	2015-2018	"domestic minor sex trafficking"	56	N/A 0
World Cat	2015-2018	"domestic minor sex trafficking" AND "Mexico"	11	3
EBSCO	2015-2018	"domestic minor sex trafficking"	13	2
SAGE	2015-2018	"domestic minor sex trafficking"	17	2
Google	2018	Searched specific topics: "Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000," "Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act," "Safe Harbor Law," "National Human Trafficking Hotline," and "polarisproject.org"	5	5
Google	2018	"U.S. Department of Health and Human Services HHS.gov"	1	1

pregnant with an unwanted child that may lead to unsafe abortions. The victims may also develop gynecological infections beyond STDs that may go untreated. When girls are initially victimized it is common for them to be given drugs and/or alcohol to get them to comply with their trafficker's demands. At other times, the victims make the choice to use illicit drugs to lower their inhibitions and to numb the pain of what has become their new reality. Drug abuse may have been present prior to a victim's involvement in DMST which could have led to taking part in risky behavior. For these reasons, drug abuse is categorized as both a risk factor and a consequence of DMST. Because of drug abuse and the trauma the young victims are subjected to, they are also found to suffer from mental illness such as post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideations, and self-injurious behaviors. Female youth are more likely to experience internalizing behaviors because of trafficking such as suicidal ideations, depression, and anxiety. Male youth are more likely to experience externalizing behaviors such as aggressive behaviors, drug use, and running away (Sprang and Cole, 2018).

If/When victims escape their traffickers, they have needs very specific to them that other sexually victimized youths may not have. Survivors of sex trafficking may have limited education due to being trafficked at a young age and many times removed from the educational system. They require educational opportunities to obtain their General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and vocational opportunities to learn a trade. Having an education and learning a trade can help the survivors feel self-sufficient and able to support themselves, thereby minimizing their chances of returning to the life they have escaped. Survivors also need medical attention they have lacked while they were being trafficked. Their experiences may leave them with physical injuries that have been exacerbated due to lack of medical attention. They may also suffer from sexually transmitted diseases that may or may not be treatable. Psychological services are also needed to help the survivors deal with the trauma of being victimized time and again (Twigg, 2017). It is important for individuals working with DMST victims to understand that some young women may be more willing to see themselves as victims than others, and that perception of self can impact subsequent rehabilitation work between the young women and their service providers. For some young women, being told that they are victims may be liberating in that their victimization is being acknowledged; whereas others may feel disempowered or looked down upon because they do not perceive themselves as victims (O'Brien, White, and Rizo, 2017). All the services needed for survivors of DMST are currently provided in residential treatment centers across the United States; however, more centers are needed (Twigg, 2017).

## Conclusion

Domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) is a specific type of sex trafficking that targets our own nation's children. The exact prevalence is unknown. This issue that is plaguing even our smallest cities needs to be brought to the attention of all who will listen and then observe and respond to protect children and youth. Specific risk factors can lead young children to the hands of a predator who will sexually exploit them until they are no longer of use to them. Knowing what to look for when providing services to minors can help identify potential victims before they become involved in prostitution, child

pornography, or other forms of sex trafficking. However, it is also important to know that not all victims will present with what we commonly perceive as a *risk factor*. We must think outside of the box and realize that children who come from good homes and are not abused by their caregivers can also become victims of sexual violence and DMST. One study found that despite homelessness being a reliable indicator for future DMST victimization, 68% of participants lived at home and 63% were with a parent or guardian at their medical evaluation that determined they had been sexually victimized (Goldberg, Moore, Houck, Kaplan, and Barron, 2017). Another statistical difference in the study by Goldberg et. al., was that 34% of patients attending school reported doing well; however, 37% of all participants had truancy issues, another reliable indicator of future DMST victimization.

## Implications and Limitations

One significant gap in the professional literature is the lack of studies that include male victims or survivors. Sex trafficking is often thought of as a female-only social problem when, in fact, boys are equally as likely to be victimized as girls. The cases of males who are victimized may go unreported because of the shame of admitting it. The issue itself goes unreported but even more when the victim is male. Alongside that issue is the fact that an exact prevalence rate of the problem is unknown. There needs to be a better way to estimate the number of juveniles who are involved in commercial sexual exploitation (CSE). It is important to know accurate data so that services are made available to current victims and rescued survivors. DMST victims and survivors have very specific needs that need to be addressed. There are currently five residential facilities in the United States that offer aftercare services to only DMST survivors. Further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of such centers. It would also be beneficial to be able to replicate these centers in other areas of the United States (Twigg, 2017).

Although DMST is a common occurrence, it goes unreported for various reasons. Some reasons for not reporting or identifying the problem is the lack of knowledge of the risk factors, the victim is ashamed, local law enforcement agencies report the problem as something other than sex trafficking, social service providers fail to conduct thorough assessments of reports of alleged abuse or neglect, and medical personnel fail to recognize physical and psychological signs of abuse. For those victims who are provided with medical attention, there is no mention if any medical issue is prevalent amongst them (Goldberg, Moore, Houck, Kaplan, and Barron, 2017). Another limitation which can be an area for future research is what we can do to stop this problem from spreading more than it already has. There is a lot of existing literature on the victims, now it is time to create the literature on the perpetrators. It is important to know what makes the adult men and women want to experience sex with a young child, or to provide children to be sexually abused and dehumanized. When this information is discovered, we can hopefully begin to fix the problem from the root. When there is no longer a demand for youth as products for sexual gratification, we will begin to see less of a need for traffickers to supply them as such.

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