

POLICY ESSAY

IDENTIFYING HUMAN TRAFFICKING VICTIMS

Identifying child victims of trafficking

Toward solutions and resolutions

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Human trafficking for forced labor and sexual exploitation continues to be a major cause of concern to the international community. With the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, the United States took a lead role in combating human trafficking and set standards for other countries with respect to the prevention of human trafficking, prosecution of traffickers, protection of victims, and promotion of partnerships. However, despite tremendous efforts by the federal as well as by local governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the research community working together to fight trafficking in persons, solutions remain elusive. Most victims of severe forms of trafficking are women and children. In the United States, most trafficking victims, but particularly child victims, go unidentified, and even fewer gain access to the services developed to help them break free from their traffickers and reintegrate into the wider society.

Since the passage of TVPA 2000 through September 30, 2009, 212 children (individuals younger than age 18) have been identified as victims of trafficking and have been “determined eligible” for services by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which is responsible for their care. This figure represents approximately 11% of the total number of victims—adults and minors—who have gained access to services under the TVPA provisions. The small number of trafficked children identified so far could be as much a result of the clandestine nature of the phenomenon as the inadequate and misplaced strategies used to identify trafficked children or the fact that the estimates far exceed the reality and gravity of the situation.

Amy Farrell, Jack McDevitt, and Stephanie Fahy (2010, this issue) in “Where are all the victims? Understanding the determinants of official identification of human trafficking incidents,” which has stimulated the present series of policy essays, asserted that “by understanding

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how often and under what conditions police find, investigate, and prosecute cases of human trafficking, we will be in a better position to identify and overcome barriers to police responses to trafficking and understand the limitations of official statistics about human trafficking” and provided several specific recommendations to improve law-enforcement identification of human trafficking. Although the involvement of law enforcement is crucial in enhancing the identification of trafficked victims, the problems and solutions involve many other players.

The Case Study

The case of Analis both illustrates the inadequacies of the current system to identify trafficked children properly and points out the many gaps that still exist in the system of care established for trafficked children.¹

Analis was born in 1986 in a small town in Honduras. She comes from a large family with ten siblings. When she was an infant, her parents separated; her father remarried and moved to a different town. Her mother fell ill and could not care for Analis. Baby Analis was sent to her maternal grandmother. Analis spent the next 12 years in her grandmother’s care. She reported having a warm and loving relationship with her grandmother. The same, however, could not be said about her relationship with her uncles, who reportedly forced Analis to work on the family farm since she was 6 years old. Child labor is common in Honduras. According to a report prepared for the National Statistics Institute of Honduras, 15.4% of children between the ages of 7 and 17 worked in 2002 (Ayes Cerna, 2003). Most of the working children lived in rural areas (69.2%), and 30.8% were urban dwellers (Ayes Cerna, 2003). Despite needing to work since an early age, Analis attended school for 5 years. She is literate in Spanish.

When Analis turned 12 years of age, her grandmother fell ill and decided to send her to live with her biological father and his wife. Her stepmother was not happy to have to care for Analis. When her adult daughter from a previous marriage, Carmen, came to visit from the United States and offered to take Analis back with her, the stepmother readily agreed. Analis reported wanting to take advantage of the opportunities Carmen presented.

In the fall of 1998, Analis traveled with Carmen to a large metropolis on the West Coast. They crossed the border using fraudulent papers. It became apparent later that Carmen had many aliases, which she used both to cross the U.S.–Mexican border and to get work. *This is the first point at which the system failed Analis.* If adequate protocols were in place at the U.S. borders to identify trafficking cases among the population of minors crossing the frontier in the company of adults who are not their legal guardians, then Analis might have been identified as a child victim of trafficking at the time of border crossing. Although it might not have been possible at this early stage to identify the situation Analis was headed for, the circumstances of her entry certainly warranted a closer look. With U.S. immigration officials annually apprehending approximately 100,000 unaccompanied children at U.S. borders, it is likely that a significant number of potential victims are being overlooked.

1. Analis was part of a larger study, supported by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), to examine patterns of abuse of child victims of trafficking, analyze the challenges service providers face in providing services to trafficked children, and assess prospects for the integration of child survivors into a wider society.

Carmen had two children of her own by two different fathers—a boy named Mauricio and a girl named Sofia. Carmen worked as a manager of a cleaning service to support her family. She forced Analis to help her clean apartments. Instead of attending school, Analis worked for her stepsister. A neighbor noticed that Analis was at home at the time when all other neighborhood children were at school and reported this information to the police. The police ordered Carmen to enroll Analis in school, and she attended the local school for a few days.

This is the second point where the system failed Analis. The police did not seem to do much more beyond ordering Carmen to enroll Analis in school. They did not inquire why Analis was being taken care of by a stepsister. They did not seem to be interested whether Carmen had legal guardianship of Analis and did not inquire about her parents. Analis's case worker believes the school asked for her immunization records and her birth certificate to finalize her school enrollment. Needless to say, Carmen did not have any of the required documentation, and Analis did not return to school.

If the system worked properly, then Analis would have been interviewed by the police or by a school counselor separately from her stepsister. Someone would have talked to her about why she was not in school, how she was spending her days, and how long she had been in the United States working and not attending school. In short, someone would have tried to figure out why such a young girl was working full time instead of going to school. Her answers certainly would have raised red flags and might have warranted a call to Child Protective Services (CPS) to initiate an investigation of the stepsister and a possible removal from the home. Additionally, questions about whether she was being paid and how she had ended up cleaning apartments would have revealed that she was not just working but was trafficked. This line of questioning could have led to a report of trafficking to federal law enforcement, a federal investigation, and, ideally, a referral for benefits. According to her case worker, Analis never mentioned speaking with the police or with a school counselor.

Case file notes indicate that Analis attended school only for a few days. She disappeared from the school shortly after enrollment. Neither the school administration nor the teachers reported her absence to the police. *The system failed Analis for the third time.* If the system worked correctly, then the school likely would have attempted to contact Carmen and, after a certain number of absences, likely would have had to contact juvenile court, a truancy officer, or other designated party.

Shortly after being forced by the police to enroll Analis in school, Carmen, fearing discovery, decided to leave the West Coast and moved the family, including Analis, to a large Southern city. They lived there for approximately 2 years. Again, Carmen found work managing a crew of workers cleaning local motels. Analis again was forced to work for her. While living in the South, the 14-year-old Analis met her boyfriend, Jorge. According to Analis, both Jorge and his mother were kind to her.

In the summer of 2002, Carmen was fired from her job and arrested for writing fraudulent checks. Carmen's children and Analis were placed in the custody of CPS. Carmen's children were released to the custody of their respective fathers. Mauricio's father came from California to

claim his son, and Sofia's father came from the upper Northwest to claim his daughter. Mauricio's father volunteered to take Analis with him as well, and she was released into his custody. *The system failed Analis again.* Analis' placement in CPS should have been a good setting in which to learn her history and identify her as a trafficking victim. If CPS was well versed in issues related to child trafficking, then they might have been more vigilant; not only would they not have released her to a stranger, they could have reported her case as trafficking to Federal or local authorities and begun Analis on the path to appropriate benefits and services.

Analis did not like living in California and ran away to be reunited with Jorge. She did not succeed. Analis was apprehended by immigration officials when the bus she was traveling on was stopped at a random checkpoint. *Here is another point where the system failed Analis.* The authorities at the checkpoint failed to identify Analis as a victim of trafficking. Although it might be somewhat unreasonable to expect the Border Patrol to identify trafficking victims at this point, it could be argued that they could be conducting more thorough interviews. They could have asked Analis how long she had been in the United States, how she had supported herself during that time, and whether she had gone to school. Were Analis willing to tell them the truth, they could have recognized that she might have been trafficked and reported it to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to follow up with an investigation and a referral for benefits.

Analis stayed in a detention center—a large institution ill-equipped to provide child-centered services—for approximately 8 months; during that time, the administration of the center was undergoing a transition from the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which complicated things even more. An inquiry from the police to the Regional Juvenile Coordinator at the local immigration office revealed that Analis was in deportation proceedings and would be deported within 45 days. *Yet again, the system did not work for Analis.* Despite having been at the detention center for months, it seems that the staff of the center did not recognize her as a trafficking victim and did not report the trafficking to federal law enforcement.

Analis did have legal representation with a *pro bono* attorney working for a nonprofit legal aid organization. He interviewed her to file an asylum claim and suspected that she was a victim of human trafficking. *This time was the first that the system actually worked.* The attorney notified immigration authorities that a trafficking allegation was pending. He also contacted the Civil Rights Division in the Department of Justice. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) became involved. An FBI agent interviewed Analis while she was in the detention center. Despite the fact that the Department of Justice policy is to interview child victims of trafficking in the presence of an attorney who would be their advocate, Analis was interviewed by the FBI without an attorney present. It is surprising that the FBI interviewed Analis alone, especially because Analis had a *pro bono* attorney, who could have been summoned. *After a promising turn of events, the system did not work as it should have.*

Analis's *pro bono* attorney worked hard to convince immigration officials to terminate their case against her. He succeeded as evidenced by a T-visa application found in her case files. The

INS released Analis, and new living arrangements were made for her with a group of religious women. Although Analis felt secure in her new surroundings, not all was well. At this point, Analis still had no access to benefits available to child victims of trafficking and had to rely on the generosity of the religious women. *The system was failing her or working extremely slow at best.* The FBI contacted the religious women to interview Analis, and they agreed. However, Analis again was interviewed without an attorney present. *This point is yet another instance in which the system did not work.*

Identification Challenges

Analis is an example of a child who could have been identified as a victim of human trafficking much earlier in the course of her journey to the United States if the authorities she came into contact with were equipped to identify child victims. Unfortunately, the fact that Analis traveled to the United States on fraudulent papers in the company of a young woman who was neither her mother nor her legal guardian did not cause any suspicion on the part of immigration officials at the U.S.–Mexico border. Later on, representatives of local police also did not seem to be overly concerned that a 12-year-old child did not attend school nor did they inquire as to who were her legal guardians. They simply ordered Carmen to enroll Analis in school and thought the matter resolved. When she stopped attending school, officials apparently did not follow up. Still later, authorities at a checkpoint on the road leading from California to a neighboring state also failed to identify Analis as a victim of trafficking. Again, a minor traveling alone without any documentation was thought of as a child violating immigration laws, not as a possible victim of trafficking. Additionally, she spent time in the custody of state CPS without being identified as a victim and was released to a stranger connected to her trafficker.

Analis also could have been identified as a child victim of human trafficking while in the detention facility. She spent 8 months in the facility. This length of time should have given the staff ample opportunity to identify her as a trafficked child and not as a mere violator of immigration law. As a child detainee, she must have been interviewed by social-service personnel about her family and her migration experiences. The staff seemed to have been ill-equipped to ask appropriate questions that could have led to proper identification of her trafficking circumstances. The detention center's personnel not only had more time but also had more responsibility than Border Patrol to assess her situation. It seems, from this case study, that they missed the problem entirely.

Toward Solutions and Resolutions

Experts suggest that first contact with unidentified child victims most likely would be made by one of the following groups: (a) immigration officials at or between ports of entry and at detention facility, (b) local law enforcement, or (c) service providers (educational, social-service, and medical providers) (Bump and Duncan, 2003).

Improvements at the border have the most potential for increasing the identification of child victims of trafficking. Each year, immigration officials apprehend approximately 100,000

unaccompanied children at U.S. borders. Some return voluntarily, and some are returned because of bilateral agreements. Mexican children, for example, routinely are returned because of existing agreements between Mexico and the United States. Little is known about the children who return to their countries of origin. Additionally, many children remain undetected within the United States, and their well-being is largely unknown. Numerous service providers suggest that these children are at risk for continued victimization and re-trafficking.

Approximately 8,000 children remain annually in the custody of the U.S. Federal Government. Approximately 900 children are in the custody at any given time (USDHHS, 2006). Experts stress that a good possibility exists that both the larger population of children returned to their countries of origin as well as the smaller group of children in federal custody include many unidentified trafficked children (Bump and Duncan, 2003). To date, nobody has studied any of these children. Lack of research on these children impedes our ability to identify child victims of trafficking.

The heightened sense of security post-9/11 has channeled governmental resources overwhelmingly toward combating terrorism. As a result, border patrol agents are not receiving enough training on trafficking issues. This issue is complicated by the fact that identification of children, especially female children, at the border is difficult because often they present themselves and are classified as adults. Analysis of fingerprint records at the border shows an unusually high number of female entrants that are 21 years old (Bump and Duncan, 2003). Trafficked girls also are coached to say that they are the spouses or relatives of the trafficker. Analis was instructed to refer to Carmen as her sister, despite the fact that they are not related biologically. Carmen is Analis's stepmother's daughter from a previous marriage, and they had never lived in the same household.

Furthermore, at the time of border crossing or at apprehension at the border, trafficked children might not have suffered through the most terrible exploitation or even known that they are being trafficked. Analis is a case in point. She was told by her stepmother to go to the United States with Carmen to ease the burden her presence was exerting on the family's situation. Analis seemed to have been eager to avail herself of the opportunities a journey to the United States was supposed to provide. She had no way of knowing that Carmen would exploit her, force her to work, and not send her to school.

However, by the time she was apprehended at a checkpoint on the way from California back to the South, she certainly had been trafficked by Carmen. It seems, though, that Border Patrol did not identify the trafficking. Even if Border Patrol had suspected trafficking, comprehensive procedures did not—and still do not—exist to ensure that information is always passed on to ORR when the child is placed in federal custody. Border Patrol or ICE might have reason to believe that a child was trafficked, but it is possible, even likely, that such information will not be conveyed to the federal facility that will be caring for the child. Awareness of such information is crucial to prevent deportation or release back to traffickers.

At the local level, training of law enforcement is essential to improving the identification of child victims of human trafficking. At present, most local law-enforcement contacts with

trafficking victims happen in an ad hoc manner; police officers usually encounter child victims during the course of their daily routines. Analis was one of the early cases of child victims identified in the United States, and her contact with local law enforcement as well as with CPS predated the *Rescue and Restore Campaign* and associated training programs for law-enforcement personnel, service providers, and the general public. The police, the child welfare workers, and the school administrators were ill-equipped to make a proper assessment of her circumstances, which might have resulted in an early identification.

The low number of trafficked children identified and receiving services vis-à-vis the number of estimated victims continues to plague the antitrafficking community. The governments, both federal and local, and the NGOs that must work together frequently are starting from scratch to design collaboration. Many actors in the current system are not used to working with each other. For instance, although foster-care providers might be familiar with working with courts and mental health-care providers, they might not be used to working with federal law enforcement, and vice versa. Thus, the complexity of the system sometimes defeats the goal of finding and serving trafficked children; the more pieces to a system, the more possible cracks for children to fall through.

Although some NGOs claim they are providing services to trafficked victims, both minors and adults, they keep these data confidential and, in many cases, do not refer their clients to ORR 151 for determination of service eligibility. One only can speculate about the reasons for not wanting these victims to have access to federally funded services—perhaps service providers fear that some survivors in their care would not meet the criteria of the trafficking definition and deem them too traumatized to share their trafficking story with federal officials.

A significant number of child victims of trafficking had been referred to the U.S. Federal Government but were determined ineligible for federally funded services. Between 2004 and 2007, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS) had referred to 151 cases, which included an estimated 808 to 2,308 child victims. Only 23 children (accounting for 14 of the 151 cases) received benefits. The remaining children, estimated at 787 to 2,287 victims, did not receive benefits. Based on the information the USCCB and the LIRS had at the time of the referrals, both agencies considered the children to be victims of child trafficking (Go dziak and Bump, 2008).

The reasons why so many children did not receive benefits are numerous. In some cases, federal law-enforcement agents or U.S. attorneys were not sympathetic to the children's plight and deemed them victims of smuggling rather than of trafficking. In at least one case, underage victims of arranged marriages were considered to have been kidnapped rather than trafficked. In other cases, the children were reluctant to disclose detailed information about their experiences, which led to insufficient evidence of the crime of trafficking. In yet another case, a group of choir boys was brought to the United States by a convicted sex offender who promised to pay them for their singing. Because he did not pay, they went back to Zambia before the case could be investigated thoroughly. In several instances, the child's original story changed and federal law enforcement chose not to endorse benefits. In some cases, a lack of

sufficient evidence to support the endorsement of trafficking benefits led to the children being placed in removal proceedings and receiving deportation orders. Little systematic data exist on these children. Field coordinators and case managers do keep notes, but no central database of these children is available.

Trafficking in persons often is portrayed as the world's fastest growing criminal enterprise with profits that rival the illegal drugs and arms trade. Reports repeatedly quote the number of \$7 billion in profit to indicate the magnitude of the phenomenon (Denisova, 2001; Roby, 2005; Scarpa, 2006; Spangenberg, 2002). Reports also talk about networks of international organized crime, which are attracted to the trade in human beings because of low risk and because the criminal penalties for human trafficking are light in most countries (Pochagina, 2007; Sheldon, Chin, and Miller, 2007; Tiefenbrun, 2002). Different Trafficking in Persons reports produced by the U.S. Department of State reiterate this assertion, which describe how traffickers enjoy virtually no risk of prosecution by using sophisticated modes of transportation and communication and avoid punishment by operating in places where little rule of law is present as well as a lack of antitrafficking laws, poor enforcement of such laws, and widespread corruption (DOS, 2003–2007). Media and international organizations also talk about the fact that the crime of trafficking in persons offers international organized crime syndicates a low-risk opportunity to make billions of profits by taking advantage of unlimited supply and unending demand for trafficked persons (Burke, Ducci, and Maddaluno, 2005; Claramunt, 2002; ILO, 2002).

Given the lack of research findings and statistical data, it is difficult to assess accurately the scope of organized crime's involvement in human trafficking (Bruckert and Parent, 2002: 13). The distinction between trafficking and smuggling is not always easy to make. According to John Salt (2000: 43), the notion that human trafficking and organized crime are closely related is widespread, despite a lack of evidence-based data to support this assertion. This alleged connection is based on the fact that people of different nationalities are part of the same group of trafficked victims, that trips across a long distance require a well-oiled organization, that substantial amounts of money are involved, that itineraries change quickly, that legal services are available quickly, and that a strong reaction occurs to counteroffensives by law-enforcement agencies (Bruckert and Parent, 2002). These arguments developed by Europol (Salt, 2000) also are shared by others (e.g., Juhasz, 2000; Taibly, 2001). Some researchers point to a close connection between organized crime and trafficking for sexual exploitation, which indicates that the magnitude and geographic scope of the sex industry are phenomenal and that organized crime is involved at various levels (Caldwell and Pieris, 1999; Shannon, 1999).

Although many reports indicate the involvement of large criminal networks in human trafficking, family involvement in trafficking, particularly child trafficking, should not be underestimated. These smaller operations based on kinship or friendship ties, of course, might be part of larger criminal networks. Analis certainly was not trafficked by a criminal network, and neither were most of the 146 trafficked children we studied. Moreover, the trafficked children did not speak of criminal networks but focused on the close relationships between themselves

and those who helped them cross the U.S. border. Some were upset when law enforcement or service providers referred to their family members as traffickers; even the children who felt wronged by their loved ones had difficulty conceptualizing their actions as criminal.

Recommendations

Anti-trafficking resources need to increase for law enforcement, especially at the border and at other ports of entry

Analís is not the only child not identified as a victim of human trafficking or as at risk for trafficking. Children are not being identified in adequate numbers. The inherently clandestine nature of trafficking requires that significant time and resources be allocated to the agencies mandated to combat trafficking. Particular attention needs to be paid to children crossing borders in the company of adults who are not their legal guardians.

A need exists for ongoing, comprehensive training programs for immigration officials and local law enforcement

Analís encountered immigration officials at least twice—at the border and at a random checkpoint—but they failed to identify her as a trafficked child. To date, only a couple of child survivors of trafficking have been identified at the border; most identifications occurred at a much later point in the trafficking journey. Although evidence suggests that local law enforcement was instrumental in identifying several child victims of trafficking, local law enforcement also failed Analís. Carmen was ordered by representatives of local law enforcement to enroll Analís in school, but they did not seem to be knowledgeable enough about human trafficking to make an appropriate assessment and identify Analís as a victim of trafficking. The ability of local law enforcement to identify victims of trafficking needs to be more consistent.

ORR facilities for undocumented children need to be alerted to trafficking issues, and the children in their care need to be screened appropriately for trafficking

Analís was not asked trafficking-related questions at intake to the immigration detention center. It was her *pro bono* attorney, in trying to assess whether she had an asylum claim, who identified her as a victim of trafficking. The ORR recently has implemented screening protocols designed to help their facilities identify trafficked children. These intake protocols need to be implemented consistently and trafficking training promulgated widely throughout the ORR-funded facilities.

Identification of child victims of trafficking needs to be made a priority by the government

Reportedly, children might not be given the benefit of the doubt when questions come up about their eligibility for benefits (Bump and Duncan, 2003), and a fear might persist that many undocumented children will try to take advantage of the immigration relief (T-visa) stipulated by the TVPA. This case seems to indicate that this fear is unfounded. Nevertheless, such fears might be a factor in the low number of children identified and appropriately served to date.

Information flow needs to improve about potentially trafficked children apprehended by immigration officials (at the border or at any point afterward) and between and among appropriate governmental and nongovernmental entities

Immigration officials apprehended Analis at a random checkpoint but apparently did not ask any questions that might have enabled them to identify her as a trafficked child. However, had they asked pertinent questions and made a proper identification, this information should have been forwarded to the detention center where Analis was placed or provided to the ORR or to DOJ trafficking officials to facilitate a determination of eligibility for federal benefits and a more rapid move into an appropriate care setting. At the moment, information about children crossing U.S. borders with persons who are not their legal guardians is not forwarded routinely to the ORR by the ICE or by Border Patrol. As indicated, only a couple of child victims have been identified at the border.

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