

## Identifying and Predicting Classes of Sex Trafficking Survivors in the United States

### NEED BEING ADDRESSED

Estimates suggest that at any given time, upwards of 21 million people around the world are victims of human trafficking (International Labor Organization, 2017; U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons [TIP] Report, 2013). While there are no universally accepted approximations of human trafficking within the United States, some sources propose that the number reaches into the tens of thousands (Clawson et al., 2009). The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TPVA) defines human trafficking as an act of “recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion” (22 U.S.C. § 7102). The rates of trafficking victimization supersede the combined global mortality rates of heart disease (8.7 million) and strokes (6.2 million), the leading causes of death in 2015 (WHO, 2017). Of known trafficking cases, over 70% involve sexual exploitation (TIP Report, 2015). It is well known that sex trafficking victimization is linked with major health concerns including sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse/addiction, depression, anxiety, personality disorders, psychotic behavior, physical health problems, and suicidality (e.g., Lederer & Wetzel, 2014; Oram et al., 2016). Further, human trafficking in the U.S. and globally is a costly epidemic with billions of dollars directed toward state and federal law enforcement, health and human services programs for survivors, and most importantly, the intangible cost of human lives.

Despite the influx in global advocacy and intervention initiatives, post-trafficking resources for survivors are sparse. Sex trafficking survivors have significant physical and mental health needs, but there are currently no empirically validated treatment approaches for this population. Despite increasing research on the sex trafficking phenomenon, existing studies rely on small sample sizes and qualitative analysis to examine victimization in terms of simple frequencies. These findings offer a foundation for understanding the sex trafficking crisis, but they neglect nuanced details of trafficking victimization. There is little understanding of the trafficking inception process, how survivors escape, what increases their likelihood of treatment engagement, or unique risk and resilience factors associated with this population. Due to a lack of empirical research on the experiences, characteristics, and unique needs of sex trafficking survivors, there are currently no professionally agreed upon models of best practice for physical and mental health treatment. Thus, there is urgent need to address this gap in knowledge and inform service provision by developing interventions that optimize outcomes for survivors.

The purpose of the proposed Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008) study is to identify the unique typologies (i.e., profiles) of sex trafficking survivors, which will inform treatment protocols that are optimally matched to survivors' individual needs. Our central hypothesis is that there are varying and unique characteristics, or trafficking profiles, among survivors. The rationale for the proposed research is that, once the unique experiences, characteristics, and needs of various sex trafficking survivor profiles are identified, we can begin developing tailored intervention approaches that can mitigate the mental and physical health crises associated with trafficking victimization.

We will examine two specific aims to test our hypotheses and thereby fulfill our overall objective:

1. **Identify the unique profiles of sex trafficking survivors within the United States.**
2. **Determine the individualized needs and treatment-seeking patterns of these unique sex trafficking survivor profiles.**

### APPROACH

***Engaged Activities & Collaborative Partners.*** The foundation of the proposed study's research design is the Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008) framework. CBPR departs from traditional research methodology by building trust with marginalized communities to establish and mobilize collaborative community partnerships for research and intervention. CBPR is defined by the equitable integration of community members, service

organizations, and researchers in all aspects of the research process. In CBPR, research agendas originate from, are conducted within, and are subsequently owned by the community of interest. When research emanates from community need, it is more likely that results will meaningfully inform action and policy. By engaging community stakeholders and responding to their self-identified empirical priorities, researchers contribute to the “democratization” of research, thereby bridging the gap between science and practice. This, in turn, facilitates an integration of knowledge generation and action *in context* to promote social change and improve health outcomes.

In practice, CBPR is an iterative process that relies on strong, ongoing community partnerships characterized by mutual learning, trust, and empowerment. These relationships enable researchers to connect with vulnerable and traditionally hard to reach populations. Further, they also facilitate bidirectional exchanges between community members, service organizations, and researchers that enhance the cultural and contextual appropriateness of research protocol, thereby strengthening research outcomes.

Consistent with the CBPR method, we developed an advisory board named *RESTORE*, “Research and Education with Sex Trafficking Survivors on Resilience and Empowerment.” This board includes former sex trafficking survivors and representatives from several community organizations who facilitate survivor rescue and recovery programs. Members of the *RESTORE* advisory board represent diverse geographic regions and professional disciplines (e.g., clergy, social workers, law enforcement officers, etc.). Through conversations with board members, we have collectively identified thematic challenges facing trafficking survivors and barriers to service provision. The aims of this study were unanimously identified by this group as empirical priorities. To address gaps in the field, the *RESTORE* advisory board, representing 6 independent agencies/groups (i.e., The Homestead, Exodus Cry, Women’s Crisis Center, Kansas Attorney General’s Anti-Human Trafficking Unit, The University of Nebraska Medical School, and The Women’s Fund of Omaha) will act as liaisons between researchers and the target population – sex trafficking survivors within the United States. We will collect data for the proposed study from these organizations and their partner sites. The study’s target recruitment goal is 250 participants.

To facilitate recruitment and advancement of the proposed research initiatives, the Trauma Research, Education, and Consultation at K-State (TRECK) team will serve as the K-State counterpart to the *RESTORE* team members. The TRECK team, established in 1998, focuses on developing research programs, providing education, and clinical consultation about issues related to trauma and traumatic stress. This multi-disciplinary team engages undergraduate, masters, and doctoral students from three different colleges at K-State. In the 2016 – 2017 academic year, the TRECK team included 14 undergraduate students, 2 master’s students, and 1 doctoral student serving as the team coordinator. The resources of the TRECK team combined with the field-connections of the *RESTORE* board ensures the successful completion of the proposed study design.

**Methods and Procedures.** Adult sex trafficking survivors (18 years of age or older) identified by one of the partner organizations will be invited to participate in a one-time online quantitative survey. For the purpose of this study, sex trafficking will be operationalized by the U.S. State Department’s definition of sex trafficking (“Sex trafficking occurs when a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age”). Partner organization employees will inform individuals who meet these criteria of the study. Survivors who express interest in the study will be referred to an online survey via Qualtrics. Participants will be paid \$30.00 for taking part in the study.

**Measures.** A wide range of gold standard biopsychosocial assessments (a total of 20 measures) will be modified and used to gather comprehensive data on trafficking survivors’ unique health profiles. The survey will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes to complete; for this reason, providing incentives for participants is necessary.

**Analysis.** Data will be analyzed with a Latent Profile Analysis (LPA; Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012). The LPA is an advanced statistical analysis that allows researchers to examine their populations of interest as heterogeneous rather than homogenous groups with distinct differences. The benefit of using this person-centered analysis to address the proposed aims is that we will be able to identify unique typologies or classes of sex trafficking survivors. The LPA generates these profiles based on common factors shared by participants that make them distinctly different from other groups within the

sample. As a result, we are able to develop a more nuanced picture of sex trafficking survivors within the United States.

### **Timeline of Project and Accomplishment Benchmarks**

IRB approval for this study is expected between May 2017 and June 2017. Data collection will begin in July 2017. Our collaborative partner organizations interact with approximately 1,000 sex trafficking survivors annually and have extensive networks to programs across the country and globally. Therefore, we do not anticipate challenges with regard to collecting data. Data collection is expected to take 6 months. Data analysis will begin in January 2018 and will conclude by April 2018. Conference presentations and publishable manuscripts will be prepared once data collection is complete. In addition, this project will provide a preliminary dataset that will be beneficial for pursuit of additional funding, including NIH, DOJ, and similar national agencies.

### **Funding Requested**

We are requesting \$10,000 to support the successful completion of this project. Approximately \$7,500 will be targeted for participant compensation. Statistical software required for the proposed analyses include SPSS and Mplus with the mixture modeling add-on. These packages will cost approximately \$1,095. The remaining \$1,405 requested will be used to support researcher travel to data collection sites. The researcher will visit each site (located primarily in Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, and Oklahoma) at least once during the study period to distribute recruitment flyers, manage participant remuneration, and train organization staff on accessing the Qualtrics survey.

### **Potential Impact for all Collaborative Parties**

Upon successful completion of the proposed research, we expect our contribution to be a detailed understanding of the varied and unique typologies (i.e., profiles) of sex trafficking survivors in the United States. This contribution will be significant because it will inform the development of targeted intervention and treatment approaches for this marginalized and underserved population. Results are expected to move the field vertically forward by outlining the unique topography of sex trafficking survivors beyond basic frequencies and general trends. This information will provide a stronger and more deeply integrated foundation for future research, theory, and intervention practices specific to sex trafficking survivors. With dynamic data on survivor physical, psychological, and interpersonal profiles and their associated treatment-seeking patterns, we will be able to develop and test the efficacy of tailored intervention services, thereby mitigating the damaging effects of trafficking victimization. In addition, we anticipate the development of comprehensive materials for professionals in a variety of areas who are directly involved with this population, including law enforcement, health and human services providers, as well as local, state, and national government entities combatting the sex trafficking industry and providing recovery support for survivors.

### **Fit of Project with CECD Funding Priorities**

- Community-based participatory research
- Applied interdisciplinary research aimed at addressing important public issues
- Programs aimed at bettering the lives of underserved populations
- Community asset identification and mapping, strategic planning, and resource development