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STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Human sex trafficking is a global problem that needs addressing. Walk Free Foundation (2018) estimates that human trafficking affects 40.3 million people across 167 countries. As alarming as this estimate is, it is likely that trafficking is underreported. The reasons for this might be the victims experiencing fear, shame, and distrusting others (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018). Another concerning fact is that there are victims, such as sexually exploited children, with intellectual disabilities. Equally disturbing is that this problem lacks the appropriate attention it deserves.

INTRODUCTION

- ❖ Intellectual disabilities are defined by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) as challenges with overall mental abilities that negatively affect cognitive and adaptive functioning (APA, 2013).
- ❖ Children with intellectual disabilities experience developmental delays in comparison to their typically developing peers.
- ❖ They often need additional support to attend to their daily living activities, learning acquisition, judgment, and problem-solving abilities.
- ❖ If children with intellectual disabilities do not receive help from their caretakers, they may be at risk of being exploited by others.
- ❖ One of the more disheartening ways this occurs is through sexual abuse and sex trafficking.

HYPOTHESES

- ❖ Children with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be victims of human sex trafficking compared to typically developing peers.
- ❖ The criminal justice system is not aware of the severity of human sex trafficking of children with intellectual disabilities due to a lack of research.

KEY TERMS

- ❖ *Intellectual disabilities* – challenges with overall mental abilities that negatively affect cognitive and adaptive functioning (APA, 2013).
- ❖ *Modern slavery* – human trafficking, exploitation, forced marriage, and forced labor (Walk Free Foundation, 2021).
- ❖ *Human trafficking* – using coercion, force, or fraud for the purposes of commercial sex acts or labor (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2021).



CURRENT RESEARCH

- ❖ An exploratory mixed methods study conducted by Reid (2016) compared 15 juvenile sex trafficking cases that involved underage girls with intellectual disabilities to 39 juvenile sex trafficking cases involving underage girls without intellectual disabilities.
- ❖ The results of this study indicated that underage girls with intellectual disabilities were disproportionately at risk of being sexually exploited by perpetrators (Reid, 2016).
- ❖ Reasons Reid (2016) posited for sexual exploitation of underage girls with intellectual disabilities were an inability to self-identify as a victim, a lack of awareness that sexual trafficking occurred, and placement into dangerous and inappropriate situations. These factors make it relatively easy for sexual predators to manipulate underage girls with intellectual disabilities.
- ❖ The findings from a literature review of 13 studies conducted by Wissink et al. (2014) were in alignment with the Reid (2016) study results.
- ❖ Results indicated that children with intellectual disabilities were more likely than their typically developing peers to be involved in sexual abuse.
- ❖ An interesting point was that their involvement in sexual abuse included being a perpetrator, as well as a victim.



CURRENT RESEARCH

- ❖ It was hypothesized by Wissink et al. (2014) that children with intellectual disabilities who perpetrated sexual abuse against other children with intellectual disabilities likely learned these inappropriate behaviors through their own experiences of being sexually abused.
- ❖ A qualitative study conducted by Phasha and Myaka (2014) interviewed school teachers, school nurses, a psychologist, social workers, and parents to understand their prevention beliefs regarding sexual abuse of those with intellectual disabilities.
- ❖ They found that due to the vulnerability of children with intellectual disabilities, support should come from areas they encounter daily, such as, in their home, school, and community (Phasha and Myaka, 2014). Support in all areas of their lives can hopefully curb the risk of sexual exploitation.

PROPOSED INTERVENTIONS

- ❖ Forensic psychologists need to educate the legal system that children with intellectual disabilities who are sexually exploited are the real victims in these cases.
- ❖ If forensic psychologists raise awareness about these crimes, then safeguards can be implemented to protect this vulnerable population.
- ❖ Stricter penalties and longer sentences for perpetrators -- while providing support for the victims -- is necessary.