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CODA Research Project

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Sex and Human Trafficking

*A Research Project for CODA*

**Introduction**

Terre Haute, Vigo County, and the surrounding counties in the area are recognized as one of the most prevalent regions for sex and human trafficking. Terre Haute, known as the “crossroads of America,” receives a lot of cross-country travelers coming through Interstate 70 and stopping in Terre Haute. Additionally, the handful of colleges and universities present in the area create an open door for traffickers to come to the area. By understanding the prevalence of trafficking in the region and the perceptions of trafficking by students and local citizens, community partners can be better prepared to work with victims of trafficking and create a culture of awareness around the issue.

**Background**

Sex trafficking occurs when a person is forced into the commercial sex trade for the monetary advantage of someone else. The victims of sex trafficking are often the youngest and most vulnerable members of society. The average age for someone entering sex trafficking is 13 (Walker-Rodriguez and Hill). Beyond just targeting those at a young age, traffickers often prefer those who are running away from home or are otherwise separated from their families (National Network for Youth). This makes the trafficking crime hard to track and therefore difficult to enforce. With the rise of the Internet and online communication, there is also a rise in sex trafficking starting online

before turning to an in-person act. The existence of online chat rooms, social media sites, and message boards make it easy for predators to create fake accounts and lure in their victims. The act of sex trafficking is illegal and is the second largest criminal enterprise in the world.

Second only to drugs, more people are involved in sex trafficking than any other criminal act in the world. More than 3,500 sex trafficking acts are reported each year. In a single sting, 150 people were arrested for sex trafficking and approximately the same amount of people were recovered as victims (FBI). Of those being trafficked, the average age for a victim is 34 years old and the cause is most often homicide. With the ever-increasing risk of sex trafficking, authorities are placing more focus on stopping the crime and detecting where it might occur.

United States Attorney General Loretta Lynch is making sex trafficking a major focus for the Department of Justice. "Human trafficking is a monstrous and devastating crime that steals lives and degrades our nation," she says (FBI). There are several ways for Lynch and other authorities and partners to notice where trafficking might occur. Young teens that would otherwise be financially burdened might start wearing expensive clothes or having more money than usual. Someone appearing more fearful, anxious, depressed, or paranoid than usual might be a sign of sex trafficking (Polaris). Students who normally attend school and classes regularly might start to skip and miss more class. Since a lot of sex trafficking occurs at motels, expensive cars at cheap motels, lots of people coming and leaving from a single room, and young girls with multiple room keys might be a trafficking sign (CNN). Once spotted, there are things community authorities and partners can do to help prevent trafficking.

In motels, there is a movement to passively get the attention of trafficking victims and attempt to pull them out of the situation. The SOAP movement – standing for Save Our Adolescents from Prostitution – is placing contact information on bars of soap for victims to call if they are in a trafficking situation (Sicking). The founder of the SOAP organization escaped from the sex trade in the United States herself and created the movement to help others like her who need help now (Sicking). Additionally, there are movements in schools, on universities, and other domains where trafficking might occur.

### **Trafficking Presence in Vigo and Surrounding Counties**

Sex trafficking in the Wabash Valley is lacking in specific numbers, but it is reasonably believed that the area is on par with national numbers. The FBI estimates nearly 300,000 American kids are at risk of becoming victims of sex trafficking (Melillo). Indiana Attorney General Greg Zoeller has been very outspoken on sex trafficking and has made it one of the major issues to address in his office (Melillo). By placing such an emphasis on the issue, Zoeller sees that sex trafficking is present in Indiana. While there are few specific statistics on its presence, that is understandable because of the difficulty authorities have in tracking trafficking across the country.

The Attorney General's office does report that Indiana saw 100 reports of human trafficking in 2014 (Melillo). Robin Donaldson, chief operating officer of Indiana Youth Services Association, says as of September 2015, there were already 30 reported cases of trafficking that came through her organization alone (Q102.7). At least 30 cases in nine months and 100 in the previous year is a shocking number for a state the size of Indiana. It shows the high presence of sex trafficking in Indiana and how it matches the country's numbers. Since Indiana is a Midwest state and sees a fair amount of cross country traffic,

it is reasonable to expect Indiana's numbers to be even higher than other states. The Terre Haute area, with Interstate 70 running through it, is likely a major contributor to the state's sex trafficking problem. What is even more unclear than the presence of sex trafficking, however, is the awareness of the issue within the community.

### **Awareness of Trafficking**

We conducted a survey of students and community members at Indiana State University and in Terre Haute. The survey was shared via social media and promoted by word of mouth. 49 participants, 92 percent female and 8 percent male, completed it. Ages ranged from 18 to 44 years old with the mean age being approximately 21 years old. The majority of participants were seniors and juniors in college (45 percent), sophomores accounted for 27 percent, freshman were eight percent, four percent were graduate students, and 16 percent did not identify as students. The survey was conducted using a series of questions based on a Likert scale.

Results of the survey showed most participants understand the presence of sex trafficking and where it exists. While 21 respondents believed sex trafficking occurred in the Terre Haute area, only 12 believed it happened in their hometown. Even more (36 participants), however, believed sex trafficking occurred in the state of Indiana. This creates questions of where the respondents are from, which the survey did not inquire about, and if they are from a town in Indiana. Further research with more defined questions would be beneficial to answer that question.

All respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement about victims immediately seeking help, showing they realize that victims often do not comfort right away if at all. Similarly, 40 of 49 respondents disagreed that victims always come

from poverty lifestyles. This could be due to the wording of the question with respondents attempting to provide answers they thought were expected, based on the wording of the statement. Most other statements received similar responses from all of the participants in the survey.

One other concerning response is that 32 people disagreed with the statement that they would be able to identify someone who was being trafficked. 12 others selected a neutral option, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement. Only five people thought they could identify a victim of sex trafficking. This is problematic because although many of the respondents believed trafficking occurs locally, they likely have not personally met a victim or know the warning signs of trafficking victims. This opens up potential for promotion of the problem to the community to boost awareness.

This survey shows there is a basic understanding of the problems with sex trafficking but lack a more complex understanding. Respondents understand sex trafficking exists and that it is a problem in the community for the most part, but would not be able to identify victims or know what to do if they encountered a victim. CODA, along with other community partners, should distribute materials to the community and make sex trafficking more of their focus to enhance community knowledge of the issue.

### **Conclusion**

Sex trafficking is a major issue across the country, in the state of Indiana, and in the Wabash Valley. Vigo and surrounding counties see an increased presence of sex trafficking due to Interstate 70 and being the crossroads of America. The survey to determine awareness of sex trafficking showed a general, basic understanding of the issue but the community appears to lack complex knowledge of sex trafficking. Informing the

public of how to identify victims and help those victims once identified can increase awareness. CODA's work with sex trafficking should be two-fold: first, the organization can help victims of trafficking and second, CODA can raise awareness of trafficking within the community it serves.

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