

SHELTERING SURVIVORS: A LITERATURE REVIEW OF SAFE HOUSES FOR SEX TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS

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ABSTRACT

Sex trafficking is a prevalent issue in the United States. Even with the scale of this issue, services for survivors have struggled to effectively meet the needs of survivors. Service providers for housing programs have to be able to meet basic needs as well as assist with complex needs necessary for long-term recovery, like mental health and legal services. The present research was compiled to understand better how housing services in the US for survivors of sex trafficking approach aiding survivors and where improvements are necessary. Overall, the findings indicate differences in what programs offer and the availability of services. The residential programs reviewed differ in the category of program they are as well as who they aid. While commonalities were found in struggles for the programs, many of the programs are fundamentally different because of their differing approaches to providing services.

Keywords: *Commercial sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, human trafficking, safe houses, residential programs*

SEX TRAFFICKING IN THE U.S. OVERVIEW

According to the U.S. Department of State, sex trafficking is when “a trafficker uses force, fraud, or coercion to compel another person to engage in a commercial sex act or causes a child to engage in a commercial sex act” (United States Department of State, n.d., para. 3). Accurate statistics regarding sex trafficking are hard to find due to the nature of the crime, barriers regarding sharing victim information, and challenges identifying victims. Even with these barriers, it is estimated that at any given time in 2021, there were 6.3 million people in forced commercial sexual exploitation (International Labour Organization, 2022).

While sex trafficking is a well-known social issue, services for victims have remained limited. The area within these services of particular interest in this review is housing. In this review, the focus will specifically be on contemporary research concerning residential housing for victims of sex trafficking. It is worth noting that research on housing for victims is limited and will be acknowledged more extensively later in this article. This

review will address why housing is a relevant need for victims reentering society, the different housing options available, their limitations, and the lack of contemporary studies on housing and housing practices for sex trafficking victims in the United States.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Understanding the background and context of sex trafficking and safe houses is imperative in order to understand the scope of the research and the necessity of this literature review. A safe house is “a secure transitional residential facility that typically provides housing and services” (Olmos & Murphy, 2019, p. 1). Over the decades, understanding and responses to trafficking have improved, but the challenge of meeting the needs of survivors has persisted. This is incredibly important as “80% of survivors end up being re-victimized if they do not have a safe place to go” (Safe House Project, 2023, “The Problem,” line 5). One study done by the National Human Trafficking Hotline found that 64% of respondents cited a lack of affordable housing as a critical barrier to escaping their trafficking

situation (Anthony, 2018). Housing programs are essential as they can help bridge this barrier. The issue of housing is complicated because there are no set standards, many differing approaches, and waitlists can be long.

There is no set standard for housing for victims. Housing is often coordinated through agencies and non-profits, usually funded through government grants and private donations. Housing options vary in what services they offer as well as in their approach. Because of these differences, survivors and service providers must decide the best fit for each individual while still being mindful that housing is limited. Part of the reason waitlists can be long is due to the lack of programs. For example, in 2013, only 33 active residential programs were open across 16 states and the District of Columbia (Reichert & Sylwestrzak, 2013). Additionally, 28 states had no active residential programs for sex trafficking victims and no plans of opening any facilities (Reichert & Sylwestrzak, 2013). Certain aspects can make finding housing even harder. Things such as criminal background, substance abuse, age, or gender can all affect eligibility for housing and significantly decrease housing options.

SEARCH METHODS

The literature was surveyed by searching Google Scholar under search terms such as *commercial sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, human trafficking, safe houses, residential programs, and trafficking victims*. Sources used were based on United States trends and data, with a few exceptions. All journals and articles used are peer-reviewed and verified through Ulrichsweb. Source mining from articles was also used to discover relevant sources. United States databases for trafficking, as well as the websites of anti-trafficking organizations, were also a focus for finding relevant statistics. It is important to note that there is a lack of modern studies directly regarding housing programs for victims of sex trafficking. Due to this, sources in this literature review are dated. While dated, these sources are also the most up-to-date relevant studies at the time of writing.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Housing Options

While housing may be difficult to find, there are also various housing options to choose from. Each of these options is unique in what they offer.

It is important for survivors to choose the housing option that will best meet their needs.

Emergency Housing

There are many different housing options. Emergency shelters are one of these options. They are used for crisis situations as immediate short-term housing. These often meet basic needs but are not viable long-term (Freedom Network USA, 2020). Emergency shelters are particularly scarce for men (Clawson & Dutch, 2008). Men may struggle in general to find housing, as evidenced by a study of 37 residential programs in the US, where only two programs accepted male victims (Reichert & Sylwestrzak, 2013).

Transitional Housing

Transitional housing is another option. This short-term housing has programs usually lasting six months to two years (Freedom Network USA, 2020). Transitional housing is especially limited for youths (Clawson & Dutch, 2008). Rental assistance programs give support for housing through full or partial rent payments. The lease for a unit may be held either by a survivor or by an anti-trafficking program working with a survivor. If a program holds the lease, this can help with challenges survivors may face gaining a lease. They may face common issues with a criminal record, no credit or bad credit history, and little income (Freedom Network USA, 2020). If the survivor can have the lease in their own name, it could help them build rental and credit history (Freedom Network USA, 2020).

Permanent Housing

Permanent housing is another option. Permanent housing has two main categories: tenant-based rental assistance and affordable developments. In tenant-based rental assistance, "A program subsidizes the survivor wherever they are housed" (Freedom Network USA, 2020). and in affordable developments, "The unit itself has a subsidy that reduces the rent" (Freedom Network USA, 2020). Permanent housing usually has a long wait time for victims (Freedom Network USA, 2020).

Other Housing

While the previously mentioned housing options refer to programs specific to sex trafficking victims, other organizations often find themselves caring for victims of sex trafficking as well (Clawson et al., 2003). These organizations may be refugee services, domestic violence shelters, or other popula-

tion-specific services that commonly interact with trafficking victims (Clawson et al., 2003). Because of this, these services must also be informed on how to interact with and aid survivors.

Needs of Victims

The needs of victims vary greatly from survivor to survivor. However, there are a few areas that most victims will find themselves needing assistance in. It is important for programs to address these needs to the best of their abilities.

Substance Abuse and PTSD

Victims have an array of needs that need to be addressed after they are removed from trafficking. Researchers O'Brien et al. (2019) found that victims in residential programs identified holistic care as a desire they had for their program. Substance abuse is common among sex trafficking victims (Pascual-Leone et al., 2016). Addiction increases vulnerability. Traffickers often use addiction as a way of controlling victims and/or may be used by the victim as a coping mechanism both during and after trafficking (United States Department of State, 2020). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is also common among sex-trafficking victims (Pascual-Leone et al., 2016). While PTSD remains common among survivors, contemporary research is also finding Complex Post-Traumatic Disorder (C-PTSD) to be relevant. An analysis of five studies of victims of modern slavery and human trafficking concluded that 41% of participants in these studies met the requirements to be diagnosed with C-PTSD (Evans et al., 2022). C-PTSD and PTSD can have many negative effects, some of which are particularly harmful as survivors are trying to recover through housing programs. These include severe emotional distress, self-destructive behavior, trouble with sleep, concentration, and memory, and flashbacks (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 2022).

Shelter-Based Recovery Challenges

Both disorders must be properly addressed for positive long-term recovery (United States Department of State, 2020). Researchers Langton et al. (2022) and Groton and Gomory (2021) suggest that programs should utilize mentors with experience when working with those suffering from substance use disorder, incorporate harm reduction strategies, and recognize that relapse is common on the path to recovery for survivors. This is especially important

as it is not uncommon for shelters and programs to have policies against substance use or a history of drug offenses, which can severely limit the quality and availability of services for survivors (Langton et al., 2022). Many systems of care are not able to support mental health treatment for survivors, often due to a lack of funding and availability of services (Clawson et al., 2008). This shifts mental health treatment from being an immediate crisis to a concern for long-term recovery (Clawson et al., 2008).

Cultural Sensitivity

Victims are also in need of culturally responsive care. This is a significant need for survivors as culture can help with resiliency, especially for foreign victims (Clawson et al., 2008). Clawson et al. (2008) found that Western ideas of trauma may be prone to overlook strengths in other cultures and communities that could help the recovery process. The importance of cultural sensitivity is corroborated by findings that a lack of cultural competency harms the ability of programs to meet the needs of victims, especially in the area of leadership development (United States Department of State, 2016). This relevancy is supported by the fact that in 2016, 32% of trafficking victims in North America held citizenship in regions other than North America (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018).

Other Needs

Many other needs are prevalent among victims. A survey of programs and survivors found that the top three needs for victims were legal services, medical services, and referral services (Clawson et al., 2003). Clawson and Dutch (2008) identify that legal needs are important for survivors and that international survivors may have more complex legal needs, often related to immigration status. Similar to legal needs, foreign survivors specifically may struggle with obtaining identification documents (Clawson & Dutch, 2008). The lack of these documents can cause difficulty in securing employment and access to social services (Clawson & Dutch, 2008).

SERVICE APPROACHES

Programs may vary in how they choose to approach offering services. These variances can be from how they find financial support to the principles underlying their practices. Some view this variance as positive, while others find it detrimental to survivors.

Trauma-Informed and Trauma-Specific Care

Services are often inconsistent across service providers (United States Department of State, 2016). In addition to services being seen as inconsistent with what they offer, there is also no set approach. The U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking (2016) recommends a trauma-informed approach that is culturally sensitive, while Clawson et al. (2008) differentiate between a trauma-informed and trauma-specific approach and the necessity of both in services. Scott et al. (2019) reinforce the importance of trauma-informed practices by finding that evidence-based policies support trauma-informed practices. Scott et al. (2019) also suggest that if trauma-informed care can be reflected in legislation, trauma-informed practices can become more consistent with empirically supported practices.

Collaboration

The need for collaboration between service providers to best address victims' needs is widely agreed upon (Clawson & Dutch 2008). Collaborating can help service providers share the burden of addressing many needs at once (Clawson et al., 2008). One survey found that 98% of surveyors identified housing as a primary need, but only 21% said they collaborated with housing-specific services (Clawson et al., 2003). Part of collaboration is improved coordination with federal agencies and services. Clawson & Dutch (2008) emphasize the importance of collaboration for minor victims, especially international victims because so many people are involved in their care. This is reiterated by Clawson and Grace (2007), who report that providers and law enforcement both cite the best success in meeting the needs of victims when collaboration is high among service providers, including the sharing of information. Increased partnership may also ease the process of obtaining documentation, employment, and welfare benefits (Clawson et al., 2003).

Protocol

Another area in which there is disagreement is protocol. A survey by Clawson et al. (2003) found that only 23% of surveyors said they had formal protocols in place to help them assist survivors. Not all providers agree on the necessity of protocol. While some argue that protocol helps standardize care and expectations, others argue that every situation is unique, so protocol is unnecessary (Clawson et al., 2003).

Funding

Funding is another area where programs differ. Providers often have to find ways to finance their services and alleviate the financial burden of meeting survivors' needs (Clawson et al., 2003). Having more or fewer resources affects the services offered in programs as well. When surveying providers, Clawson and Grace (2007) found a program where one residential program had to completely shut down for a period of time until they could find more funding. More financial complications may occur when survivors require specialized care, such as for long-term needs like cancer (Clawson & Dutch, 2008). Meeting a need like that for a survivor is important, but it can also quickly drain resources, so providers must decide what needs they can and cannot cover (Clawson & Dutch, 2008). Funding also impacts data and training resources (Groton & Gomory, 2021). Without proper funding, programs reported struggling to collect data and evaluate services complex (Groton & Gomory, 2021).

GAP AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The literature on housing programs for victims of sex trafficking is limited. There have been "very few evaluations of specific victim and support services...and there are few published reports and even fewer peer-reviewed studies on these services" (Clayton et al., 2013, p. 253). This lack of research makes it difficult to assess and improve services. However, this gap creates the opportunity for new research in a variety of areas concerning sex trafficking services, especially housing. Research on what services are available and the delivery of services is needed (Clayton et al., 2013). This research may also benefit from focusing on specific populations within sex trafficking, like minors or international victims.

With more research, information on what housing programs and services are most effective for survivors could be revealed. This would allow programs to rework themselves to fit the needs, and someday the wants, of survivors in order to give them the best chance possible at a positive recovery.

FINDINGS

When analyzing the data, some recurring themes emerged. The overall lack of services became apparent when looking at the compiled research. Not only were services few and far between, but

access to services was also revealed to be difficult. While many different housing options are available to cater to various demographics and needs, overall housing programs lack quality and quantity of resources. Regardless of their type, housing programs cannot keep up with the number of survivors needing assistance (Reichert & Sylwetrzak, 2013). For those lucky enough to enter into a housing program, services are often unable to meet their needs due to either lack of funding, availability of services, or both (Clawson et al., 2008). These difficulties only became exacerbated with other characteristics of victims like criminal records, age, and more.

DISCUSSION

The aim of the present review was to analyze how current housing services for victims of sex trafficking approach meeting the needs of victims. This literature review successfully did this by examining research on the needs of victims and service approaches. These needs include substance abuse, PTSD, and cultural sensitivity. Service approaches include discussing trauma-informed care, collaboration, protocol, and funding. This examination concluded that housing options are inconsistent, vary in what services they provide, lack the services necessary to meet the needs of survivors, and lack the funding required to meet the number of survivors. Because of these struggles, survivors are forced to choose what needs they should address foremost. Positive, long-term recovery becomes more challenging to achieve if only some issues of survivors are being addressed in their enrolled program. Funding issues worsen these problems. If a service lacks proper funding, then that organization will not be able to adequately meet any needs of survivors, let alone most of the needs present. Based on the chosen literature studied in this review, it can be surmised that housing options for survivors are limited, lack necessary services, and are not researched enough. Research on housing is dated but continues to be used to draw conclusions, much like in this literature review, because it is the most up-to-date research available.

With more research and the analysis of available research, more can be learned about how housing services for victims are operating and how they need to improve. Specifically, increased stud-

ies on the availability of housing services and the delivery of these housing services could make best practices become a reality. This is important as the problem of sex trafficking is not going away, and victims need to be able to receive the best care possible to recover and live safely.

Not only do current services fail to support the current number of people in need, but the number of people being sex trafficked is increasing (Dyvik, 2024). From 2008 to 2019, the number of human trafficking victims of sex and labor more than quadrupled (Dyvik, 2024). This increasing statistic reveals that services will continue to be needed and improved to accommodate the growing number of victims.

Helping victims is also of interest to the population at large as it promotes social justice and health equity. This is especially true as victims of sex trafficking are often those who are already part of vulnerable populations before being trafficked. Common victims of sex trafficking include women, children, homeless individuals, refugees, disabled persons, and sexual and gender minorities (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2009). Having quality services also helps survivors make the transition back into society. Helping survivors transition back into society allows them to become productive community members. Becoming active members of a community would help contribute to the economy. This is because reentering the community would mean spending locally and making tax contributions to the state and localities (Hewson, 2022). This shows how helping survivors has benefits beyond just them. Besides the community, additional research and evaluation of existing research benefits sociology and adjacent studies as a whole. It advances these studies by adding to the general knowledge base. Adding to this knowledge base would allow practices to be research-informed and current.

CONCLUSION

The existing literature helps bring clarity to what services are being provided to victims of sex trafficking as well as how these are being provided. The diversity of programs available is significant, but the amount and availability of programs are sparse. By synthesizing existing research, this paper explored commonalities between residential programs for survivors in needs and approaches.

The need for better funding, the utilization of best practices, and increased collaboration among services were revealed through the literature. It is important to note that while valid, these conclusions are being drawn from a limited research base.

Understanding these points reveals prevalent issues service providers face, as well as where innovations are needed for providers to adequately address survivors' needs. For future research, a few sources (Clawson et al., 2003; Clawson & Grace, 2007; "Housing," 2020) recommend focusing on survivors' experiences in residential programs and what needs they identify.

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