Child trafficking and child welfare: Implications for policy and practice

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Abstract: Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery and millions of people around the world, including children, are victims of this crime. Data concerning child trafficking is severely limited. In child welfare, research suggests a lack of awareness, understanding, and training about child trafficking. This deficit of knowledge base all too frequently results in misidentification, mislabeling, and improper care of child trafficking victims. Using a qualitative, descriptive case study approach, the experiences of ten child welfare professionals were explored. Findings reveal a connection between misunderstanding about child trafficking and ability to identify victims. Major challenges in victim identification are due to the lack of awareness, ambiguous meaning, and the absence of training regarding child trafficking. Analysis of conclusions elicits implications and recommendations for child welfare policy and practice.

Keywords: Child trafficking, child protective services, child welfare policy, child welfare practice, qualitative research

Overview
Children are trafficked globally and domestically for both labor and sex. Child sex trafficking is a particularly intolerable form of human trafficking due to the natural and inherent vulnerability of children (International Labor Organization, 2008; Vieth & Ragland, 2005) and represents a severe form of child maltreatment (Estes & Weiner, 2005). Furthermore, according to the U.S. Department of Justice (n.d.), it is illegal to lure, transport, or obtain a child for the purposes of prostitution or any other illegal sexual activity under federal law. Any minor under the age of 18 involved in prostitution is a victim of human trafficking (Walts & French, 2011). Perpetrators of these acts are considered traffickers or pimps and benefit in some manner from the sale of a child, resulting in a profit or gain of something of value.

The Problem
The majority of research focuses on children involved in international sex trafficking (Fong & Berger, 2008) and sex trafficking of minors in the United States is often hidden from public view. Even though scholars agree there is a growing number of sexually exploited and trafficked children in the United States, limited attention, resources, and programming exists (Boxill & Richardson, 2007; Estes & Weiner, 2002). Children involved in the foster care system, runaway, homeless, or kidnapped, are at an increased risk of being trafficked (Fong & Cardoso, 2009). Yet, research related to child trafficking and child welfare remains understudied. Contributing to the problem, trafficking is considered among the most difficult forms of child maltreatment to detect or investigate (Estes & Weiner, 2005; Williams & Frederick, 2009). Although it is widely accepted that human trafficking is a major social problem paired with the difficulty in understanding the complexities of this phenomenon, identification within the child welfare system has not been well-developed. The definition of child sex trafficking is ambiguous, with numerous misconceptions in regard to this specific form of child maltreatment (Adelson, 2008; Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Goldblatt Grace, 2009; Laczko & Gramegna, 2003; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2010; Schauer & Wheaton, 2006; Skilbrei & Tveit, 2008).
to these misconceptions, cases of child sex trafficking are often reported under more standard classifications of child maltreatment, such as sexual abuse.

**Significance**

Research has shown that misconceptions of child trafficking results in the mislabeling of victims; child trafficking is frequently labeled as child prostitution or sexual abuse. This mislabeling of victims directly affects the proper identification and handling of child sex trafficking cases, potentially further endangering the welfare of the child (Smith, Vardaman, & Snow, 2009). In child welfare, research suggests that a lack of training and understanding of human trafficking by state child protection service agencies results in misidentification or mislabeling. This has been shown to be largely due to the fact that intake procedures were not developed to screen for trafficking. During the intake process, it is rare for agencies, both governmental and non-governmental, to ask questions of youth related to domestic minor sex trafficking. Further, children and/or youth often do not self-identify as trafficking victims either because they are unfamiliar with the term or they do not in fact perceive themselves as victims (Mitchell et al., 2010).

Language plays a significant role in both definition and meaning of the problem. Typically, when Americans hear the term “child trafficking,” they believe it to be a problem in other countries, not in the United States (Atwell-Davis, 2010). Yet, even if they are able to concede that it does occur in the U.S., the general assumption is that the victims are foreign-born children, trafficked into the U.S., and usually in big cities. However, it has been found that child trafficking victims are also American children, and are in all parts of the country, from small towns to large urban areas. Many of these kids leave home, initially voluntary, and fall victim to traffickers along the way (Atwell-Davis, 2010). Estimates propose there are about 100,000 to 300,000 American children between 11 and 14 who are vulnerable to being sold for sex every year (Smith et al., 2009). Between 244,000 and 325,000 American youth are considered at risk for sexual exploitation and about 199,000 incidents occur every year in the U.S. (Estes & Weiner, 2002). Data suggest that 25% of child sex trafficking victims are exploited by family members and never actually leave home (Estes & Weiner, 2005). A 2014 report indicates that one in six endangered runaways were likely a victim of child sex trafficking, and of these children, 68% were in the child welfare system when they went missing (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2015).

**Child Welfare and Child Trafficking**

Often, the initial point of contact for a child victim of human trafficking is law enforcement together with child protective services. Findings from the Department of Justice reveal that 84% of all confirmed cases of child sexual abuse take place in the child’s own home; this statistic suggests that a child’s home is one of the most dangerous places for children to experience sexual abuse (Estes & Weiner, 2002). Unfortunately, many child welfare agencies lack training as well as the procedures and/or protocol around child trafficking. This results in great difficulty in terms of proper identification and appropriate services for victims (Walts & French, 2011). The failure to identify the crime as child sex trafficking is a reflection of the lack of awareness and training on human trafficking as well as the absence of identifiers of domestic minor sex trafficking in the intake process. Misidentification has been cited as the primary barrier to the rescue and response to domestic minor sex trafficking victims (Smith et al., 2009).

Child advocacy groups estimate that as many as one-third of teen runaways and throwaways (those who are unwanted or rejected by their families) become involved in prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home. Many of these children are in the child welfare system, in the care of the states, and many of them are not reported to law enforcement (Atwell-Davis, 2010). Human trafficking impacts the child protection system in a variety of ways. The lack of awareness of and training about the crime are particularly significant because this lack in awareness and training affects the proper identification and response to child trafficking victims. The International Organization for Adolescents
(IOFA) has trained child welfare professionals and findings indicate the majority of state child welfare service providers and advocates were not aware of federal and/or state anti-human-trafficking laws. Moreover, these professionals reported that earlier in their work they had encountered trafficked children; however, due to their lack of awareness of the issue, these children and youth were never identified as victims (Walts & French, 2011).

Methods
The qualitative study utilized the descriptive case study approach and sought to describe the perceptions of child welfare professionals with respect to child trafficking. A case study, as described by Merriam (2001) “is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 34). The case study methodology allows for specific focus on understanding the child trafficking phenomenon in Colorado from the analysis of individual and agency roles in the process. Specifically, the approach utilizes the descriptive case study design type, with a single case construct.

Participant Selection
Creswell (2003) states, “the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants that will best help the researcher to understand the research question” (p. 185). A non-probability, purposeful sample included ten child welfare professionals in the identified geographic area. In order to maintain confidentiality, and in accordance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the agency and the exact location of the agency is not disclosed. Rather, the identified geographic area refers to the study’s sample. The representative population was compiled based on the author’s inquiry into child welfare agencies and child welfare professionals, bounded by the geographic region, and with the purpose of the study to gain knowledge about the level of awareness, meaning of, and challenges associated with child trafficking in Colorado.

The sample for this study consisted of ten individuals who: 1) were 18 years old or older; 2) were employees at the selected agency; and 3) work within the division of children, youth and families. Inclusion criteria entailed a range of employment duration and professional appointment at the identified child welfare agency, with the specified requirement of direct service with children and families. Participant selection was limited to employees, caseworkers and supervisors, within the division of children, youth and families, who responded to the recruitment email and/or flyer. Employees at the identified agency, both men and women, were recruited for participation in this study, but had to be at least 18 years of age in order to qualify. Exclusion criteria were related to age; employees less than 18 years of age were not recruited for this study nor were employees who did not work directly with children and families.

Data Collection
The study utilized a four-pronged research approach: Stage One – Conduct email recruitment screening/post flyer to schedule interviews; Stage Two – Based on a review of recruitment, select participants to interview; Stage Three – Conduct face-to-face interviews with selected participants; and Stage Four – Return transcribed interview to participant for review to endure credibility.

Approval was granted from the IRB at Colorado State University for the study’s protocol and consent form prior to collecting data. This study utilizes an interview guide developed by the author (Appendix) and informed by the existing literature related to child welfare and child trafficking. The semi-structured interview guide consists of 28 questions, mostly open-ended and exploratory, with two Likert scale questions related to participants’ self-report of their awareness and the organization’s awareness.

Audio recording was used during the interview process to ensure thoroughness and accuracy of the information collected; however, this did not increase potential risk to the subject’s confidentiality as the audio tapes were stored under lock and key in the author’s office and only accessible by the author. Audiotapes were destroyed after transcription and the interviews were all transcribed by the author. Names and/or identifying data about the subjects were not recorded. The interviews were conducted at two locations; eight of the interviews took place in a private room at the identified agency
while two were held in the office of the author. Participants selected their preferred venue from the two options. On average, the interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes in length.

**Data Analysis**

The goal of data analysis was to describe the level of awareness of child trafficking and related phenomena, to examine and detail the meaning and definitions offered for child trafficking, and to report the challenges associated with child trafficking victim identification. Data were analyzed with the constant comparative approach to determine significant themes. Data analysis involved reading and rereading all of the transcriptions, line by line, and taking notes, highlighting meaningful quotes that captured a profound thought. Within the data, categories, emerging themes, and areas of agreement or disagreement were explored. Descriptive texts, utilizing thick, rich description as well as specific quotes, including interpretation and meaning-making, were also included. To enhance trustworthiness of the data, triangulation; member checks, peer examination, and participatory research were applied.

**Findings**

**Awareness**

With respect to participant self-reported level of awareness of child trafficking, the modal response was one, very low, based on a five-point Likert scale, with one being very low and five being very high. As stated by one participant, “I’d probably say very low, which is sad, a one.” For the organization’s level of awareness, as reported by participants, the modal response was one, very low. One participant shared, “Trafficking isn’t used; you don’t hear that ever.” Another shared, “I haven’t heard anybody say, oh he was trafficking the child.”

Participant responses concerning the awareness of laws and statistics regarding child trafficking ranged from, “No” to “Guess yes” to “Assume so” to “Hope so”, but not a single participant was aware of what the laws actually were. Five of the ten participants responded, “No”, indicating that they were not aware of child trafficking laws in Colorado. A participant commented, “I would hope so, I don’t know for sure, but I would hope so. Another participant shared, “I don’t and I should that was one of the things I was thinking when I was thinking about this like I don’t even know if there is something in Volume 7 [Children’s Code] which guides our practice to like work within and so if we had something like that come through our agency it would be like a brand new thing for many of us, if not all of us.” A participant added, “I would hope so, I don’t know for sure, but I would hope so. Like I said, the word trafficking does not come up, we never, rarely hear it ever.”

In terms of participants’ beliefs about the accuracy of the reporting of statistics in Colorado related to child trafficking cases, all ten participants believed that the statistics are not accurate and that they are likely underreported as opposed to over-reported. Participants cited similarities with the underreporting of domestic violence, drug abuse, and child abuse and neglect, issues with governmental tracking, and society not being comfortable talking about it or being able to identity child trafficking. One participant stated, “My guess would be not, yeah, I, I mean even just knowing what I do about abuse and neglect and how little is reported compared to what happens, I think probably it would be a similar instance and I think ya know in the way that sometimes society or the general public isn’t comfortable talking about those things, I think that it’s probably very similar in that they’re not comfortable talking about the fact that it could be happening here in Colorado.” Another participant shared, “I would think it’s a higher amount, there’s always a higher amount of stuff than what they know, and I mean, sexual abuse and that kind of thing.” Another added, “No I mean if you look at any other offensive thing that happens in the United States it is usually underreported by, I mean the percentage is very significantly, so when you look at domestic violence, those numbers are dramatically underreported, by tenths of what the actual percentage is, and so I would just guess, I mean, drug abuse is the same way, I would guess that it’s as much of an issue as anything else and it’s dramatically underreported.”

Participants believed child trafficking to be more common in the world than in the United States; more prevalent in developing nations (i.e., “the third world”) and among impoverished countries and
communities; and not as noticeable/familiar in the identified geographic area. One participant shared, “My perceptions and beliefs are that child trafficking probably happens at a higher rate in third world countries or other places where people are taking kids to make a profit off of them and my understanding of it is that it is sexually based is the general understanding of that and I could be so far off track it would be shaming.” A participant echoed, “I think it’s probably a higher rate in developing countries, third world countries.” One participant mentioned her lack of knowledge, but desire to learn more about child trafficking as it relates to her role as a child welfare professional. She shared, “Gosh I don’t even know, um, in terms of in the world, I know that it exists in the world and that there are maybe different regions or populations that are more highly targeted and often times it’s related to like sexual slavery and things like that, or at least that’s my understanding, but in terms of being able to go into a lot more specifics about that globally or even really in the United States, I don’t know much else so I’m not super helpful, but, part of why I wanted to do this study was because I think it’s something that, I think it’s important for child welfare workers to know and so I think it’s important to show that we don’t know about something sometimes too so in terms of that I guess I have an understanding that it’s an issue globally and here in the United States as well, but that there’s not much else I know about it.”

In the identified geographic area, child welfare professionals were much less convinced of its prevalence or were just not aware of it being an issue. Several participants shared that they believed child trafficking was occurring, as evidenced by the fact that they were participating in a study about it, but it was difficult to imagine in the community and among American children; however, they perceived a lack of awareness on their behalf as well as the general public. As illustrated by one participant, “Locally, I’m sure it might be happening, I’m just not aware of it, and it’s one of those things that I’m thinking you’re going to suddenly tell me something and I’m going to go, wholly cow, I had no idea ya know, so yeah, it would upset me a great deal, I mean not appalling, but just it would really be devastating to know that and I’m actually looking for something for when I retire in a couple years to really advocate for and so that might be something, depending upon what’s going on, I can’t go in and start shooting or anything, even though I have a license to carry, I wouldn’t do that anyway, but oh yeah, you’re recoding this, anyway I really want to know more about it.” Another participant stated, “I haven’t heard of it here. If it’s happening here I wouldn’t be surprised I guess but I don’t think it’s very well publicized.” One participant mentioned the issue of misidentification/mislabeling, “Absolutely, it’s a problem in the local area too, it’s just people are not aware of it and they don’t think they’re doing it what they’re doing, they think it’s just child abuse.” Another commented, “I don’t really know locally how much of a problem it is, but it really got me to thinking because they have this kind of continuum of the problem and it kind of shows how kids that are sexually abused within their family system, it kind of almost sets the path for them to be such a huge risk factor for later entering child trafficking, sex trafficking, because often times a family member will like get them into that, like mom will prostitute her daughter or stepdad or mom’s boyfriend will then get them involved which I thought was really, really scary that that’s such a huge risk factor is the child sexual abuse.”

The majority of participants, nine of the ten, had not received formal training related to child trafficking, most were not aware if colleagues or others in the agency had received training, and all ten reported that they were not aware of any resources at the agency concerning child trafficking. With respect to training, a participant shared, “I would guess zero percent. I would guess that nobody knows anything about it, I know that sounds extreme, but if of 100% informed people, I would guess that people here are maybe 2% informed. I would believe that nobody has this information, it’s just not talked about. We have trainings on everything, I have been here for seven years, I have heard about the most offensive things that are done against children when it comes to abuse, neglect, death, sex and never is the word child trafficking, has it ever been used in the 7 years that I’ve been here and I go to an awful lot of trainings.” Another echoed, “We have a lot of training yes, a lot of training, but the word, that word does not come up.”
The lack of awareness of what exactly child trafficking entails, how it is defined by law, and the specific criteria necessary contributed to the ambiguity expressed by participants. Most child welfare professionals based their beliefs and perspectives on limited, general knowledge, experience with child welfare and child abuse, media, and assumptions. Participants’ recognized the barrier of the absence of training around child trafficking at the agency and the need to know more in order to properly identify victims and to fulfill their role of protecting children.

**Victim Identification Challenges**

Table 1 displays the findings for the questions related to screening protocol at intake, other victim identification procedures, and whether or not there are specific criteria to be identified as a victim of child trafficking at the agency. For the question regarding screening at intake, responses ranged from “No” to “Not sure” to “In a sense” but not a single participant indicated that the agency does screen for child trafficking. The modal response was “No” as reported by six participants, three participants stated, “Not sure” and one participant replied, “In a sense.” For the question concerning whether or not there were other procedures for child trafficking victim identification, seven of the participants reported “No” while three participants stated, “Not sure.” With respect to if specific criteria are necessary for a child to be identified as a victim of child trafficking, six participants responded “No” and four stated that they were “Not aware” of any criteria or protocol.

**Table 1.** Screen for child trafficking, other procedures, and criteria to be identified as victim

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Number</th>
<th>Screen</th>
<th>Other Procedures</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
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<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Not aware</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
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<td>Three</td>
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<td>Four</td>
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<td>Five</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Six</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>In a sense</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nine</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>Ten</td>
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One participant stated, “No, because we have no criteria.” Another shared, “I think it’s necessary, I just don’t think that it’s happening like I think having all of our staff trained on risk factors, like what contributes to it, how to identify, how to interview specific cause in my opinion, I think, especially on all the child sexual abuse cases there should be some protocol interwoven for either in child protection or law enforcement related to the trafficking piece that I don’t I’m not aware that that’s happening and I find myself, like I would classify myself as a person in the agency who knows a crap ton about child welfare, like I know a lot about child welfare because I’ve been here a long time, I’ve done a lot of research on it and I’m not aware of any specific protocols to assess for child trafficking.” Another participant added, “No, having a definition and understanding it would be the first step even before learning how to identify it, if we don’t know what it is how the hell are we supposed to identify it and I would guess, I could be wrong but, I’d be so curious to see what your study proves, I would guess that I know probably just a little bit more than some of my colleagues and I am not saying that to make me sound better but I read so much and knowing that it’s not talked about among my peers, knowing that I haven’t seen it on TV, although I don’t watch as much TV, like for me I just think at least I’m reading, at least I’m finding something somewhere, so if I don’t know, so where were we, are there procedures for identifying child trafficking victims, no, we do not have any procedures.”
For questions 22 and 23, asking if child trafficking victim identification is difficult and if they believe it could be improved, all ten of the participants reported that child trafficking identification is difficult in their current position and that victim identification could be improved. One participant stated, “Absolutely, obviously, because it’s not something that’s talked about a lot here so I’m sure it could, I mean, right now, if you’re starting at the bottom, yes there’s definitely room for improvement.” Another commented, “I would say yes and I think it goes back to the knowledge and understanding and I mean if we don’t have the tools to identify them then of course it’s going to be difficult, it’s actually not going to happen.” Another participant responded, “I think anything related to children that is a concern to someone in the community could get reported so very likely child trafficking issues are reported but I don’t know if they are identified as child trafficking, so anything I mean, if we were more aware of it, I think, our role and what to do, it would be more helpful if we were aware.” A different participant shared, “Well I think that having the Colorado definition in front of me it absolutely changes how I think you look at a situation, like I think we would look at maybe say like a mother who was allowing men to come into her home and abuse her child, sexually abuse her daughter for whatever benefit, because there are many, that very much changes how I would identify her level of abuse so I think just having the definition really changes that for me.” Another added, “The Children’s Code is Title 19 and to my knowledge there’s definitions for physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, but there’s no definitions related to child trafficking.”

With regard to child victim identification improvement, one participant shared, “Yeah I mean really our agency is really good about stuff like this so I think it would be a very simple thing for the head of our agency to go ahead and just put together a training I mean we bring trainers in from all over the world for crying out loud, we have somebody that comes from Australia to train us and so really for somebody to come in, even somebody from our state who has more knowledge and expertise to come in and do a one day training I think would be a good starting point and from that point it would be very easy they’ve done it with other things that we’ve taken on or we just put together a subcommittee to come up with what we think the criteria are for identifying and then putting those things into place on an intake form.” Another participant agrees that identification could be improved by adding, “I do, I think if we have a criteria and we’re aware, I think awareness just brings more ability to identify which would help victims if they are a victim.”

Regarding training and development, all ten of the participants reported that child welfare professionals do need training and development around child trafficking and that child welfare could work collaboratively with local service providers and key stakeholders to better address child trafficking in the community. A participant stated, “Yes, clearly after doing this whole interview, yes we do, because I don’t know what we’re talking about, and honestly, I will be curious what other people have to say, but I happen to like documentaries and I seek them out and watch them so I mean that might be even more knowledge than some people have and if we were to scale my knowledge, it’s really low, oh we already did at the beginning but, so yes I definitely think we need some [training].” Another participant remarked, “Yes, absolutely. If we knew a little bit more about it or knew how to spot it… like these are things to look for if you’re in a situation and children might be being trafficked, look for these things, and, we might, we might be able to, as first responders kind of thing, maybe crack this egg open a little further.” A different participant shared, “It’s interesting to me because I think it is such a huge problem and I think that the population that we work with is such a high risk, it surprises me that in the child welfare training academy that they don’t even cover this at all.”

With respect to the question asking participants if they have ever worked with a victim of child trafficking, the main theme that developed was the realization that the majority of participants had worked with a victim of child trafficking, or potentially had, in the past, but they did not know at the time because they were not aware of the criteria. Six of the ten participants reported that with this new definition, they had in fact worked with a victim of child trafficking at the agency, but it was not documented as such. Most participants reported that it was either categorized as sexual abuse or third party abuse. Three of the participants stated that it was a possibility that they had come into contact
with a victim in the past, but they were not entirely sure. One participant shared, “I mean I have a case where a child identified horrible, horrible things, sex, physical, emotional, everything, drugs were used, weapons were used, video-taping and photographing and other people were present and mom would be drugged and fall asleep but she would get drugs from this guy and so I mean that borderline could have been because the mother was not protective and she allowed it and she received service and then like drugs… so there’s so many different facets but potentially that was a child trafficking issue and was it identified as one, no…I would consider that potentially after knowing the description or the definition so that was probably a case of child trafficking.” A different participant commented, “Well yes now that I understand what it is, I could say several.” She went on to add, “I can name two cases right now that would fall within this definition, active cases. I think it happens all the time, I mean, there’s a parent, so this mom is in this relationship with her husband, they were married, but it’s a stepdad to her children and she was aware of the uh sexual acts that were happening between her husband and her children and um I think if I were to go into details on those that might be identifying information, but there were many various acts that happened and some she was more aware of and some she was less aware of, but there was an awareness, and for her, she was receiving the home, his home that they lived in, the stability, his emotional support and he was very intimidating to her and controlling to her and so it allowed her relief when she didn’t have to deal with his behaviors and the kids took care of him, and to me that really seems to fit and it would be hard to come down, I mean, ya know these are all little things and you could just as easily say she that she was a victim of abuse, but the reality is, is as this case started to roll, she, the department did a great job of sending her to be evaluated as a sexual offender because they were concerned about her colluding with the stepdad which I thought was a good piece, I think that was a good step in the right direction to actually assess what her motives were and whether she had an awareness of the fact that she was trafficking her kids for her own piece of mind and a place to live.”

Another participant shared, “I think that they’re probably the sexual abuse is probably the most regular thing we see coming in, the sexual abuse of a child is identified and it is some person in that child’s life and so if I had to guess how many cases I, in looking back over this past year and the cases that I’ve seen I would guess that I’ve probably handled, gosh with this definition, five cases that I’ve handled that would probably meet this definition but if I had to guess percentage wise in the agency I would probably be guessing, with knowing what I know now, I would have said probably one or two percent before, knowing what I know now we could probably apply child trafficking to 10 percent of our sexual abuses cases.” Another reported, “Yes, but I didn’t think of it as trafficking at the time. Again, now with this definition, there’s been numerous cases where, I have one teenager now who when she and her siblings were younger, they lived, they were dumped with the grandparents and the grandparents were sexually abusing them and selling them out for I want to say pornography, that’s not the word I want, for sex, to people they knew and stuff like that and so then ya know these kids are screwed up, big time.” A different participant shared, “I would say yes based on the new definition that I have, absolutely there have been times in which, yes is the answer. I’m realizing I have worked with children that have technically, by that definition, been trafficked and had no idea, in my mind they were abused when it fact it also meets this definition.” She went on to say, “I’m in kind of a unique perspective because I see the work of 18 workers so I have like a much larger pool to draw from, but I think if we were looking at it this way, in our team alone I would think, gosh like maybe 12 cases a year, like maybe about one a month where I think you, if you really looked at it could probably qualify it as some ya know that the child was being exploited sexually and that a parent or a third party was benefiting from it in some way, so I guess if you divided that by three, the three teams that would be 36 cases a year would be my estimate, I don’t know.”

With respect to the question concerning how child trafficking relates to participants’ role as a child welfare professional, all participants reported that there was a direct correlation between their job as child protection workers and child trafficking being a form of child abuse. As stated by one participant, “I think it relates huge. I think that we’re the first line defenders really for kids and um could be
ya know if child welfare workers like me are not educated and are not looking for it then who is? And who’s championing those kids’ rights and behaviors so yeah I think it is a direct correlation.” Another participant added, “Try to be their voice, somebody has to do that.” Another shared, “I think that I mean given that we are talking about child abuse I mean it’s definitely part of my role to become more educated about it and be able to identify that so that we can be prosecuting people in the correct way so they don’t continue to do this cause that’s obviously not okay, so yeah I would say on a broad scale that’s definitely our role to have the knowledge about it so we can do something.”

All ten of the participants reported that child welfare professionals could work collaboratively with local service providers and key stakeholders to better address child trafficking in the community. Related to how collaboration could be best accomplished, participants noted raising awareness through education was critically needed. One participant shared, “Yes, yes, I think that if everyone is aware of everyone else’s sort of policy, we could work better together; and also, I think everyone needs to be aware of how prevalent it is, although it’s once again hard to identify.” The main themes revealed in terms of how they think this could be best accomplished centered on the strong existing network of support and collaboration in the community. Participants reported that the identified geographic area has a solid reputation and history of building effective partnerships and collaborating to address needs within the community.

Participants shared their desire to learn more about child trafficking to better recognize it and accurately identify children. Among all participants, it was widely acknowledged that training and development are greatly needed and wanted, and that as child welfare professionals, it is their role to protect and provide proper care for children. This need and desire for training is one of the most significant findings of the study. A participant shared, “That’s hilarious, yes. So if we’re mandated to address child abuse, which I believe that we are, and this is one part of that that we’ve totally neglected, that for me is an issue and something that needs to change and be addressed, and I think that for us to do that, we need to at least even recognize that we don’t know anything about it.”

Participants shared that the overall lack of awareness about the subject matter, lack of resources, absence of screening mechanisms with precise questions and indicators of what to look for, and the various ways child trafficking may appear were all challenges in the identification process. Additionally, participants stressed the need for education about child trafficking and how to recognize victims, provide services, and work collaboratively with law enforcement and other key stakeholders. All participants acknowledged the need, and expressed desire, for training and development, and that as child welfare professionals, it is their role to protect and provide proper care for the children they come into contact with.

**Implications for Policy**

Human service agencies, specifically the division of children, youth and families, critically need policies to address child trafficking. The lack of awareness is a major challenge and spans across various stakeholders with many implications. According to Logan, Walker, and Hunt (2009), often, the lack of awareness includes victims themselves, health and human service providers, law enforcement, and the general public. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) (2011) assert, “barriers to accurately assess the scope of the problem include the hidden nature of the problem, fear and cultural barriers, lack of awareness on the part of the public and public officials, the limited legal language related specifically to human trafficking, and the lack of adequate funding and training for those capable of identifying and assisting victims of human trafficking” (p.3). The perspectives shared in this study mirror the literature regarding the need for agency policies, including screening protocol at intake. The state of Colorado has laws targeting both human trafficking and child trafficking, but the awareness of these laws among the general public as well as child welfare organizations is lacking. This study found that all ten participants were not aware of official statistics related to child trafficking in the state, but perceived them to likely be underreported, corresponding to child abuse statistics, which typically are underreported as well.
The majority of participants, nine of the ten, had not received formal training related to child trafficking, most were not aware if colleagues or others in the agency had received training, and all ten reported that they were not aware of any resources at the agency concerning child trafficking. This finding parallels the literature and is significant in terms of the lack of training and development concerning child trafficking within child welfare in the United States. A few states, namely Illinois, New York, and Connecticut have been pioneers in this area and have emerging legislation and legal decisions that equate any sexual exploitation of a child with trafficking. These states have begun the process of implementing child trafficking resources for child welfare workers; but, in general, the majority of states do not have designated protocol for identification (Walts & French, 2011).

In a study by Estes and Weiner (2002), laxity in some communities concerning law enforcement and human service agencies with regard to the commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) of children was observed. It was also determined that there is inadequate enforcement of laws and policies related to the CSE of children, a lack of awareness, and inaccurate data about the magnitude and gravity of the problem. Additionally, findings revealed negative attitudes concerning children implicated in prostitution by both human service professionals and law enforcement. Law enforcement, human services, education, and health systems had insufficient structures to respond to the needs of sexually exploited children as well as poor database management of tracking systems. The outcome of these findings suggests a vast underestimation of the extent of sexually exploited children among human services and law enforcement (Estes & Weiner, 2002).

When a private matter becomes a social problem, a policy window typically affects it. According to Jimenez (2010), “When a social problem reaches critical mass in terms of public attention, there is only a brief period of time during which a public policy can be enacted, since public attentions waxes and wanes about social issues” (p. 14). There is greater awareness of the issue among organizations, professionals, and the general public (Walts & French, 2011), which means there is opportunity for policy and practice change. It is critical that policymakers are aware of the gaps related to awareness and training as well as the misperceptions about trafficking and identification challenges among child welfare professionals in order to realize any change on a legislative level.

Within this area of policy, the lack of a direct mandate for child welfare agencies to work with victims of child trafficking presents a challenge. It has been noted that many state child welfare agencies do not consider it within their purview as the focus is mostly with families and reunification, if possible. Due to the greater degree of public awareness, the assumption is that state child welfare agencies will begin to include child trafficking as part of their mandate (Walts & French, 2011). However, state child welfare agencies have been and will continue to be the main party to respond to the most severe cases of neglect, abuse, and exploitation. Since child trafficking meets these criteria, this form of abuse should be included in the mandate of any agency accountable for the protection of children and youth (Walts & French, 2011). The mandate was echoed in this study, as denoted when a participant stated, “I think we do need some sort of identification system; we do need to at least have a list of resources that people can call if they even begin to think that this might be an issue once they’ve learned how to identify it. Like keeping kids safe, this is part of it, there’s the criminal piece, but making sure the child is removed from that situation and I mean we have the authority to do that and I think a mandate to do that.”

Another implication for policy concerns the accuracy of reporting systems. If cases are not actively identified as trafficking, the needed care and requisite punishment will not occur. Moreover, the challenges with data collection and determining the extent of trafficking will continue and the magnitude of the problem will remain unknown. This point was also identified in the findings of this study. The identified agency does not actively delineate child trafficking as a potential form of abuse, and as a result, it routinely is classified as sexual abuse and/or third party abuse. The misunderstanding and mislabeling of child victims as well as the general lack of awareness of child trafficking pose serious limitations to the care victims receive as well as the legal consequences for the perpetrators. This di-
rectly impacts the ability to properly identify victims and results in significant implications for child welfare practice.

Implications for Practice
Child welfare workers have a fundamental role in their ability to identify potential child trafficking victims. A lot of victims of trafficking have previously interacted with child protection at some level, as wards of the state, foster care or group homes at the time of their recruitment, and/or through prostitution/pornography. Caseworkers are in a position to speak with vulnerable children and youth about the risks and dangers of trafficking (Walts & French, 2011). It is paramount that child welfare professionals build trust, create a safe environment, develop effective interviewing skills, and ask open-ended questions to enable potential victims the space to disclose, safely, the details about their situation.

Victims of child sex trafficking have experienced a form of sex slavery that necessitates appropriate assessment and treatment modalities to reflect the trauma they endured. However, there is a lack of evidenced-based practice for working with this population. In the American child welfare system, public child welfare workers depend on licensed private therapists and providers who are knowledgeable in treating child sexual abuse, but struggle with the treatment options available for child victims of human trafficking because of the poor best practice fit (Fong & Cardoso, 2009). Service providers need to determine the specific form of treatment needed. Typical treatment modalities of individual, family, and group therapy for child sexual abuse, commonly used by child protective services, may not be appropriate for child trafficking. Victims of trafficking may require greater sensitivity due to fear of exposure, lack of anonymity, and because family members may not be accessible. There is a great need for child protection to collaborate with private organizations working with the exploitation of children to identify appropriate treatment and therapy options, to recognize cultural competency, and to adapt services to meet the diverse backgrounds of trafficking victims (Fong & Cardoso, 2009).

It is imperative that not only child welfare professionals, but also the general public and communities, become more educated about child trafficking because there are various implications for the well-being of children based on awareness. Stakeholders, potentially impacting the fate of a child, include the justice and juvenile justice system, prosecutors, judges, district attorneys, schools, health care providers, and the public. Lack of awareness and education has the propensity to result in uninformed communities, juries, and other key individuals and entities, and may ultimately impair the rescue and proper treatment of child trafficking victims. The lack of awareness translates to a lack of victim identification, making it imperative that the public and governmental officials become better educated about the problem (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 2011). The study found this to be an issue at the identified agency and within the community. Specifically, a participant mentioned the issue with mislabeling and child abuse. She said, “No, because I think it’s ignored, I think it’s something that they don’t want to admit and they will push it off to child abuse, but they won’t actually say trafficking.”

Another implication for practice concerns the structure of state child welfare agencies. The often bureaucratic nature and size of the organization can present challenges in terms of implementing new policies and procedures as well as the issue of buy-in from leadership may also cause resistance (Walts & French, 2011). This sentiment was shared in the current study by a participant, “Well I think it is kind of from the top down…in the Child Welfare Training Academy they don’t really touch on it so like I think if there’s not policies in place, if there’s not training in place specifically to train all workers and then if there aren’t protocols with law enforcement about identifying like child trafficking like I think that it’s kind of hard to look for it if it’s not required to look for it.” This finding is significant; if child trafficking is not being addressed in any training or with any resources at the agency, it will not be identified. Additionally, there are many pressures and differing priorities with typically high employee turnover and huge caseloads. There is already a very full training curriculum for caseworkers and child protection agencies. This issue of turnover and endless training was men-
tioned in the current study as well. Participants shared the need for training to be brief, required, and informative.

According to Macy and Graham (2012), it is possible that human service providers are offering typical services to victims of sex trafficking and do not recognize them as trafficking victims. The consequences of such practices do not enable proper identification or appropriate services. Victims of this crime are considered especially vulnerable due to the horrific conditions common of trafficking situations and the intense trauma endured. Consistent with the recommendations presented by Macy and Graham (2012), the current study found that child welfare professionals need a preliminary set of questions and screening strategies in order to properly identify trafficking victims within the context of human services.

Cases involving child trafficking are often very labor intensive and complex, especially in the case of a foreign-born child or a child without evidence of a parent or legal guardian. The result, these children do not receive appropriate care, including trafficking specific, victim-centered services (Walts & French, 2011). For child trafficking victims, services must be designed to meet their specific needs and tailored to their age, incorporating multiple systems of care. Critical services include protection; safety planning; housing placements; medical and dental care; mental health services and crisis intervention; education and life skills; court orientation; and when applicable, substance abuse treatment, immigration services, and translation services and/or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes (Klain & Kloer, 2009).

The lack of proper identification and response mechanisms among agencies and service providers yields severe consequences for the welfare of children and youth, including re-exposure to exploitive and unsafe environments. The identification and treatment needed for child trafficking victims is different than other forms of abuse. The trauma often endured by trafficking victims may exceed the level of maltreatment most victims of child abuse and child sexual abuse experience (Walts & French, 2011). If this trauma and the effects of the trauma are not properly addressed and treated, the outcome for children can be intensified and longer-lasting than other types of abuse.

The literature suggests that victims of sexual abuse are extremely vulnerable and are at a heightened risk of becoming involved in trafficking situations. Traffickers often prey on people who have a history of sexual abuse (Polaris Project, 2013). Additionally, “while anyone can become a victim of trafficking, certain populations are especially vulnerable. These may include: undocumented immigrants; runaway and homeless youth; victims of trauma and abuse; refugees and individuals fleeing conflict; and oppressed, marginalized, and/or impoverished groups and individuals” (Polaris Project, 2013, para. 4). Furthermore, according to Polaris Project (2013), “Runaways and at-risk youth are targeted by pimps and traffickers for exploitation in the commercial sex industry or different labor or services industries. Pimps and sex traffickers are skilled at manipulating child victims and maintaining control through a combination of deception, lies, feigned affection, threats, and violence” (para. 6).

The following language is often associated with trafficking and serves as a guide for child welfare professionals to be aware of and to listen for when working with potential child trafficking victims. The list was compiled from calls made to human trafficking hotlines (to law enforcement and service providers) and intake with service providers working with child trafficking victims who may have been victims or third party observers of potential trafficking cases: slave or slave-like, being forced/made to do; being sold or traded for things; working a lot/too much; threats of deportation; no identification and/or passport taken away; debt to pay off; fear of employer or alleged guardian; unaware of how they got to current location; unsure or told to lie about age; any reference to prostitution, pornography, or commercial sex acts; any reference to pimp or making money for a boyfriend; threats to family; sleeps in basement or garage; escorted or supervised when out; living with a bunch of people; never been to a doctor; not allowed to socialize with friends or outsiders (or anyone); cannot talk to visitors; not allowed to talk on the telephone; not allowed/cannot go to school; not allowed/cannot have friends; and not allowed to leave the house (Walts & French, 2011, p. 48).
Human service agencies need training and development around child trafficking and screening procedures. Findings from the study reveal a strong interest and desire to learn more about child trafficking and how to properly screen and identify victims. Child welfare professionals shared the sentiment that they believe they critically need the training regarding child trafficking laws and policy as well as victim identification since they are front line workers designated to protect and serve in the best interests of the children.

**Conclusion**

Policy and practice implications signify a need for change in child welfare to better address child trafficking. The subject matter and methods of working with victims will require the development and analysis of appropriate procedures in order to determine best practices and to build upon evidence-based screening protocol. According to Walts and French (2011), the necessary policy and practice recommendations include: implement training and resources; provide training and resources; protect the human rights of victims; build resiliencies; properly identify the victims; know the rights and resources available to victims; treat the victims for trauma and after effects; identify cases as trafficking; and empower victims (p. 114). The following recommendations are offered based on the findings from this study:

- Incorporate definitions and laws related to child trafficking in the Colorado Children's Code, Title 19 of the Colorado Revised Statutes;
- Implement training and development about child trafficking in the Child Welfare Training Academy that all new child welfare workers attend;
- Provide training for all current child welfare professionals at the agency about child trafficking, its prevalence, what to be aware of, the definitions in the state of Colorado and the United States, laws, and identification measures;
- Develop screening protocol and appropriate interviewing skills/questions for child welfare professionals and intake workers with identification mechanisms to capture the language often associated with child trafficking;
- Create task force at identified agency to address child trafficking in the community and to collaborate with other key stakeholders (i.e., human services, law enforcement, mental health, schools, domestic violence/sexual assault agencies, and health care);
- Develop best practices for collaboration/partnerships between child welfare agencies, human services, law enforcement, mental health, schools, domestic violence/sexual assault agencies, and health care;
- Identify resources related to child trafficking to support child welfare professionals in their work;
- Develop best practices for working with victims of child trafficking to address the multiple needs of this population;
- Redesign report system to include child trafficking as a form of child abuse rather than the current standard classifications; and
- Prosecute under Colorado anti-trafficking legislation to build precedence and ensure traffickers receive the most severe punishment and victims are afforded the proper restitution, treatment, and care.

This paper addresses the challenges faced by child welfare professionals related to child trafficking awareness and victim identification. It is essential that policymakers and child welfare agencies consider these concerns in developing and implementing best-practices. Resources, referrals, and communication within communities need to be strengthened around the problem of child trafficking and a multi-disciplinary approach employed to address the issue. Collaboration among key stakeholders is critical for ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children.

**References**


Appendix: Interview Guide

This interview will include a series of questions concerning your perspectives related to child trafficking in Colorado.

Level of Awareness Questions
1. How would you rate your level of knowledge about child trafficking?

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2. Please explain your beliefs/perceptions of child trafficking in the world?
3. Please explain your beliefs/perceptions of child trafficking in the United States?
4. Please explain your beliefs/perceptions of child trafficking in the local area?
5. How did you first hear about child trafficking? Were you aware of it before your current position? Please explain.
   - Awareness raising campaign or public service announcement
   - Media (television, radio, internet, movie, theatre)
   - School (high school, college, graduate)
   - Job training program
   - Professional conference
   - Part of job description
   - Family, friend, or colleague
   - Personal interest or study
   - Other (please specify)

6. Are you familiar with official statistics concerning child trafficking in Colorado, that is, how many cases of child trafficking are officially recorded per year? If yes, approximately how many cases of child trafficking were officially reported in Colorado last year?
7. Do you think the child trafficking cases officially recorded in the state of Colorado accurately reflect the extent of child trafficking that is actually occurring in the state? Please explain.
8. Do you know if Colorado has specific laws related to child trafficking? If yes, please explain.
9. How would you rate your organization’s general level of knowledge about human trafficking?

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10. Have you or anyone in your organization received formal training related to child trafficking? [e.g., Classes, workshops, training sessions] If yes, please explain.
11. Are you familiar with any resources related to child trafficking/human trafficking for caseworkers?

Meaning Questions
12. If you were to describe the issue of child trafficking to another person, how would you describe it?
13. Who and what is involved in child trafficking?
14. What words and images come to mind when you hear the term child trafficking? Please describe.
15. What does child trafficking mean to you?
   a. How does this relate to child abuse?
16. Do you think there are similarities/difference between child trafficking and the following?
   a. Child abuse
   b. Child sexual abuse
   c. Child sexual exploitation
   d. Child prostitution/familial prostitution
   e. What sources of information do you draw upon in building these descriptions? Please explain.
17. If you were to offer a definition for child trafficking, what would it be? Upon what sources/resources do you base this definition?

Victim Identification Challenges Questions
18. How does your definition of child trafficking influence how you identify victims?
19. Do you screen for child trafficking in intake procedures? Please explain. Are there other procedures for child trafficking victim identification?
20. To your knowledge, have you ever worked with victim of child trafficking at your agency?
   If yes, how do they come into contact with your organization and about how many in a given year?
21. Are specific criteria necessary for children/youth to be identified as victims of child trafficking in your current position? If yes, what are these criteria?
22. Is the identification of victims of child trafficking difficult in your current position? If yes, please explain.
   a. What do you think are the greatest challenges associated with the identification of child trafficking victims?
   b. Do you think victim identification could be improved? Please explain.
23. How does the phenomenon of child trafficking relate to your role as a child protective services worker?
24. Do you think caseworkers need training and development around child trafficking? If yes, what do you think is needed?
25. Do you think local service providers and key stakeholders (legal/law enforcement/caseworkers/shelters/safe houses) can work collaboratively/form partnerships to better address child trafficking? If yes, how do you think this could be best accomplished?
26. Is there any additional information you would like to share?
27. Do you have any questions?
   Thank you for your participation!