Out of Sight and Underrepresented: Human Trafficking in the Latino Community in Nebraska: Blog post

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Human Trafficking has been defined as a contemporary form of slavery (Department of Homeland Security; Polaris Project). More in detail, the United Nations (UN) defines Human Trafficking in its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons—a key component of the 2000 Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto—as:

[T]he recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (UN 2000, Article 3, paragraph (a))
Sadly, the United States and Nebraska are not free from this crime. According to the Polaris Project, more than 10,000 suspected individual victims were identified nationally in 2017 through the National Human Trafficking Hotline and BeFree Textline. Nebraska has had close to 230 cases reported since 2007 (National Human Trafficking Hotline). These numbers are a minimum count, as in the United States “There is no aggregate data available on the identified victims of human trafficking for the whole country because the responsibility for identifying victims is spread among multiple agencies” (UN Office on Drugs and Crime). The state of Nebraska has several agencies and initiatives developed to fight human trafficking, but much work needs to be done in this area. In particular, available reports suggest that agencies—or sites—seriously underrepresent minorities. Here, we will focus on the way these gaps affect the Latino population in three ways: (1) engaging minorities; (2) research and reporting; and (3) resources. We base this analysis based in interviews with key informants at relevant anti-trafficking organizations located in Nebraska.

Engaging Minorities

The first gap identified relates to how these organizations have designed their services to help victims and survivors. Our interviews with key informants within these organizations show that there is a lack of access to interpreters and little ethnic minority representation. In particular, there are either no interpreters available in-house or they are restricted to commonly used languages. Having workers that look like them and make them feel represented would increase trust among vulnerable populations.

Although there are issues, some organizations are attempting to address these. One of our key informants, for example mentions that their organization is working to expand inclusivity to better engage minorities.

In another example, a bilingual advocate at a non/governmental organization stated that the lack of interpreters is a problem. In her organization, there are only two bilingual advocates in-house. They also use a few on call interpreters or they outsource to local services or organizations. A particular struggle has been finding interpreters for certain languages, such as indigenous Latin American dialects. Not being able to communicate with at-risk populations continues to leave them at a high risk to be trafficked.

This lack of interpreters directly affects minorities’ possibilities to be assisted by organizations. Interpreters not only provide possible victims with a safe language to communicate, but also can convey the victim's cultural norms to the organization. Thus, preventing organizations from separating their own biases from minorities’ culture.

In summary, the main organizational and initiative gaps identified were:

- Lack of engaging minority populations
- Deficiency of interpreters
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- Scarcity of victim/survivor voices of minorities
- Unconscious awareness of numerous cultural differences & varying cultural norms

**Research and Reporting**

Human trafficking research is vast, but there is still much to be learned about these crimes. Furthermore, data limitations (e.g., lack of official data, limited details on victims) skew the results of the research and who is most likely to be targeted. As an example, the table below retrieved from the [National Human Trafficking Hotline](https://www.unomaha.edu/college-of-arts-and-sciences/ollas/research/ollas-blog-human-trafficking-may-2019.php) depicts some of the demographic information of victims between 2012 and 2016 ([National Human Trafficking Hotline 2018](https://www.unomaha.edu/college-of-arts-and-sciences/ollas/research/ollas-blog-human-trafficking-may-2019.php)). The table illustrates what information is missing. By reporting some categories as “Fewer than Three,” for example, it is impossible to know the exact magnitude of cases, limits the validity of data, and misrepresents the relevance of this particular category of people trafficked.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VICTIM DEMOGRAPHICS (SEX AND LABOR TRAFFICKING CASES)</th>
<th># OF CASES</th>
<th>% OF CASES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>67.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minors</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>91.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Fewer than Three$^{10}$</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender Females</td>
<td>Fewer than Three$^{10}$</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender Males</td>
<td>Fewer than Three$^{10}$</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Non-Conforming or Two-Spirit Individuals</td>
<td>Fewer than Three$^{10}$</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Citizens/Legal Permanent Residents</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>45.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Nationals$^{11}$</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29.73%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^{10}$To protect the identity of the people we serve, the National Human Trafficking Hotline does not disclose exact statistics related to venues, industries, victim information or caller information referenced fewer than three times.

$^{11}$A Foreign National in this data set is defined as any individual who is not currently a US Citizen or Legal Permanent Resident.

Another issue is that identified victims are often disproportionately people in poverty. Impoverished individuals, however, often include many minorities. In this way, minorities should be a target group for intervention and prevention of victimization. Although organizations attempt to serve groups with various risk indicators (e.g., poverty, abuse/neglect, substance use), they still have a lot of work to do. Given the complex nature of trafficking cases, victims may be unwilling to self-identify as such or may be misclassified by first responders/agencies who do not recognize the signs of trafficking. Still, Latino minority groups are given little emphasis in research and reporting of human trafficking.

In response to this gap, some local agencies have started to focus on why Latinos are underrepresented in their estimates. Two of our key informants noted that Latino victims are trafficked through different means compared to non-Latino populations. While other ethnic groups are trafficked online, Latino victims are most likely trafficked by word of mouth. For this reason, not much is known about the process whereby these victims are exploited. This likely leads to underreporting that is not reflected in current human trafficking research. Ultimately, this lack of

knowledge severely hinders our ability to address the trafficking of Latinos until more details are gathered.

In sum, the research and reporting gaps identified were:

- Lack of race & ethnic backgrounds in the reports
- Unclear numbers reported in general
- Possible misclassification of cases
- Difficulties in identifying those populations at high risk

**Resources**

The final gap we identified in our research was related to resources. Multiple organizations that we spoke to stated there were not enough materials distributed in different languages or enough interpreters available for minority populations, as we presented above. This, according to the Women’s Fund report: Nothing About Us Without Us, calls for “increasing the accessibility of information about available services...and resources need to be made available to suspected trafficking victims at hotels and hospitals.” Materials should be made available in different languages and dialects and in places where at-risk people would find them.

Another gap is that there are limited resources available for children who are victims of trafficking. One of our interviewees states, “some of the resources that are absent is housing for juveniles for kids that are 11-13 years old. Housing has been a problem because there are many restrictions on the shelters in the area.” Children without housing are easy targets for potential traffickers because they likely have no guardians or caregivers who could intervene from would-be abusers. In the case where a minor is trafficked by someone other than a parent, Nebraska legislation ensures him or her access to services. However, if children are trafficked by their own parents, then it is more difficult to provide them with services. According to recent legislation, this is defined as “Child Abuse and Neglect Intake” and not as trafficking (Women’s Fund of Omaha). The gaps in resources are apparent throughout Nebraska especially since there are fewer organizations that help anti-trafficking initiatives in Western Nebraska. There is a great need for an expansion of existing resources in addition to new resources in locations where none currently exist.

In this final section, the resource gaps we identified are for any all those that are in danger of being trafficked, but are particularly more relevant to minority populations. These are:

- Availability of translated printed resources placed in relevant areas.
- Lack of general resources in Western and Central Nebraska
- Limited resources for children.

To conclude, we would like to restate the importance of researching these gaps in anti-human trafficking initiatives for the Latino community. This is essential for a better understanding of this crime and what is needed to confront it. Better information and understanding of this problem is important to provide organizations with tools that facilitate intervention, treatment, and ultimately
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prevention. The gaps identified here must be addressed if agencies wish to continue making strides in the fight against trafficking in Nebraska.

*This blog is the result of our senior research project developed to partially fulfill the requirement of the Major in Latino and Latin American Studies at the University of Omaha. Dr. Teresa Kulig, Assistant Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, and Dr. Cristián Doña-Reveco, Associate Professor of Sociology and OLLAS Director guided us in this work. The research behind this blog is part of the Observatory of Latinos in Nebraska, an OLLAS project funded through a Sherwood Foundation Grant.

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