What is child trafficking?

The Palermo protocol is a comprehensive international instrument to define human trafficking. It urges State Parties to align definitions and interpretations on trafficking within their own domestic legislation. Generally speaking, trafficking of children is a form of human trafficking that includes one or more specific acts performed for the purpose of exploitation. The ‘act’ includes the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt, of a child. Types of exploitation may include, but are not limited to, forced labor (which may involve many types of work, including domestic servitude), slavery and practices similar to slavery, begging, forced criminality, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, organ removal for donation, illegal adoption, and forced participation in armed conflict. The Luxembourg Guidelines provide for detailed definitions and guidance on the forms of sexual exploitation of children, and emphasize that “exploitation” involves an exchange of something of value (which is not restricted to a monetary exchange). However, the guidelines are not a binding treaty/convention or protocol. The Luxembourg Guidelines themselves rely on the Palermo Protocol’s legally binding definition of trafficking, and they specifically note that “trafficking can be committed for many different purposes, an important one of which is related to sexual exploitation.”

Children (persons under 18 years of age) cannot legally consent to exploitation so ‘means’ such as force, fraud, coercion and abuse of power are not necessary elements in the definition of child trafficking, whereas they are essential elements when defining adult trafficking. Nonetheless, many children experience force, fraud, coercion, forced drugging, abuse of power, and other means of facilitating exploitation. In addition, many cases involve some element of online activity, including use of the internet to recruit, advertise, and manage trafficked persons, or to facilitate transport and money transfer.

It is difficult to obtain exact figures regarding the prevalence of child trafficking and exploitation, given the covert nature of the crime, variations in laws and definitions of key terms, variable resources among countries with respect to identifying trafficked persons and other challenges. However, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that 4.5 million children were involved in forced labor in 2016, including 1.2 million involved in sex trafficking worldwide. And additional 5.7 million children were estimated to be in a forced marriage. Trafficking and exploitation can occur within the child’s home country (domestic) or in another country (transnational).

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3 Ibid., 61
5 International Labour Office (ILO) (2017), Global estimates of modern slavery: Forced labour and forced marriage
Trafficking and exploitation may lead to profound health consequences. Children are often exploited in unsafe conditions where they experience violence and physical deprivation. They may develop sexually and nonsexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse disorders related to forced drug/alcohol use or reliance on substances as self-medication, injuries and chronic medical conditions that occur secondary to inadequate safety equipment, malnutrition, and unwanted pregnancy. Besides the tangible physical symptoms, trafficked children may develop major mental health problems including major depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress. The global prevalence of human trafficking and its profound effect on children’s health require a multi-layered public health approach that focuses on prevention, recognition and provision of services, utilizing experts from multiple disciplines who collaborate to give the child’s best interest the highest priority.

Why a public health approach?

A public health approach to child trafficking provides the conceptual framework for primary, secondary and tertiary prevention and response activities. It prioritizes primary prevention strategies that address the root causes of exploitation. It emphasizes the need for scientific research to develop and implement evidence-based intervention and treatment programs to support victims in their post-trafficking experience and prevent re-trafficking. Central to the public health approach is a commitment to constant monitoring and evaluation that leads to incremental improvements in program impact and effectiveness. This helps to ensure that scarce resources are being allocated to the most efficacious initiatives.

Programs and strategies to address trafficking and exploitation are informed through rigorous research, as well as ongoing surveillance to track the prevalence and types of child trafficking, as well as risk and resilience factors. This information may enhance a country’s understanding of the extent and forms of child trafficking that are occurring internally and across borders. This public health data can be used to specifically add or refine the domestic legislative definitions of child trafficking, improve criminalization provisions, set proportional criminal penalties, and define egregious circumstances for offenses involving children so that increased penalties may be delineated. Also, it drives prevention strategies, and the development of new interventions.

The public health approach emphasizes the need for multidisciplinary collaboration in order to implement prevention programs targeting vulnerabilities at the individual, peer/family, community and societal levels. Cross discipline cooperation is also essential in the recognition and response to child exploitation and trafficking. Trafficked children have myriad needs that can only be met through an organized and coordinated multidisciplinary approach.

5 L. Kiss, K. Yun, N. Pocock; et al. (2016) Exploitation, Violence, and Suicide Risk Among Child and Adolescent Survivors of Human Trafficking in the Greater Mekong Subregion
6 J. Greenbaum, N. Bodrick (2017), Global Human Trafficking and Child Victimization
7 J. Levine (2017), Mental health issues in survivors of sex trafficking
8 J. Greenbaum, N. Bodrick (2017), Global Human Trafficking and Child Victimization
9 T. Herrenkohl, I. Leeb et. al. (2016), The Public Health Model of Child Maltreatment Prevention
Conclusion

Child trafficking is a severe form of exploitation that requires a public health approach in order to effectively prevent, recognize, and treat affected children. The public health approach offers multiple relevant strategies for addressing child trafficking, including prioritizing prevention, creating an evidence base from scientific research to drive anti-trafficking initiatives, maintaining ongoing surveillance of the crime, and engaging in a multidisciplinary approach that strives to address underlying vulnerabilities impacting individuals, families, communities and entire societies.  

Further, to address child trafficking there needs to be a shift in national policies so that the issue is recognized as a systemic violation of children’s rights, per the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. All countries are currently State Parties to the CRC, except for the United States.

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