

Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking and Gang Control

Gangs control a significant proportion of the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) and domestic minor sex trafficking industries. Street gangs use CSEC and DMST as a source of income to fund their gangs. A National Institute of Justice (NIJ) study in San Diego found that sex trafficking produces an estimated \$810 million annually in San Diego, making it that city's second-largest underground economy after drug trafficking (\$4.76 billion annually). Gang members made up an estimated 85 percent of pimps/sex-trafficking facilitators in the area.[1]

In gang-controlled trafficking, youth may engage in prostitution as initiation and/or to bring in revenue for the gang. Gangs perceive sex trafficking as less risky, compared to arms and drug trafficking, and thus view it as a lucrative market. In some gangs, prostitution is a central revenue source. Minors, in particular, can be vulnerable to gang activity. Females are often unable to move up rank in gangs, and sexually assaulted and exploited by other members.

Youth are often manipulated in gangs through:

- Promises of protection
- Status
- Money
- Loyalty

Assessment Questions for Professionals Working in a Gang-Controlled Situation

Professionals working with vulnerable youth may use the following questions to help determine if the youth is or has been in gang-related trafficking situation. Assessment questions may be asked upon entry into the program, but are best to use after building rapport with the youth throughout the time the youth receives services. Understanding terminology and why to ask the questions is important.

- Have you ever been asked to go to a skip party? How did you hear about it?
 - Skip parties are parties are often advertised online. They are often held during the day where teens “skip” school and are often promised alcohol or drugs. They youth are then set up to be sexually assaulted.
- Were you asked to bring any friends?
 - Many teens are provided with a sense of comfort and perceived safety when bringing friends to a party. However, gangs take advantage of this, using it as an opportunity to also sex traffic the youth's friends.
- Did anyone ever show you any social media or YouTube footage of them or someone else harming someone?

[1] National Institute of Justice, “Gangs and Sex Trafficking in San Diego” September 20, 2016, from NIJ.gov: <http://nij.gov/topics/crime/human-trafficking/pages/gangs-sex-trafficking-in-san-diego.aspx>

- Youth involved with gangs are often exposed to footage of violence committed by the gang as a tactic to intimidate the youth. This footage often include crimes as severe as rape and murder.
- What “clique” or “set” were you with?
 - Women and girls who are trafficked in gangs often have no ideas of the rules or how to move up the ranks in the gang. They may express affiliation with the gang but do not know and/or do not belong to a clique or set. Not knowing/not belonging to a clique or set may indicate that they are being trafficked.

Red flags specific to gang-controlled trafficking

- Change in color choices, especially in relation to shoes. Youth preferring to wear specific colors of shoes, ie. yellow, purple or red. Showing a specific color may be the earliest indicator that a youth has become involved in a gang. It is important for practitioners to familiarize themselves with the gang colors local to your practice area
- Jewelry that is excessive or not the style the youth previously wore
- Tattoos indicating “ownership” in the later stages of gang control

Lessons learned from gang intervention:

- Gang-controlled trafficking often creates barriers to leaving
- Youth survivors need comprehensive access to education and vocational training
- Practitioners need to be aware of and how address threats of violence. Safety plans for youth and staff members is important.
- Survivors need help creating new social support networks and finding new places to spend their free time
- It is often better for survivors to fade out than to announce departure.
 - Practice conversations they may have with other members
 - Consider changing appearance (clothing--specifically colors, hair, covering tattoos)

It is essential to remain vigilant of the potential of some youth to be exploited by gangs - especially when these gangs exert a strong presence in communities. Direct service providers, school administrators, and parents must work together to understand the needs of individual youth, providing the essential resources to youth to reduce their vulnerability to such trafficking.