

Human trafficking victims' unlikeliness to report crimes tied to police officers' bias

August 1 2019



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Police are increasingly called on to combat crimes related to sex and labor trafficking. A new study sought to determine how the victims of these crimes are served by police. Based on researchers' review of

human trafficking investigations and interviews with police and service providers in three communities in Northeast, West, and South United States, the study concluded that victims of human trafficking often do not trust the police and rarely seek their assistance. The study also found that these views are due in part to victims' beliefs that police are not trained adequately and hold biases and stereotypes about them. The authors offer recommendations to improve police responses to these victims.

The study, by researchers at Northeastern University and the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, appears in *Criminology & Public Policy*, a publication of the American Society of Criminology.

"Central to their public safety mission, [police officers](#) have an obligation to help victims feel safe, assess their immediate needs, connect them with providers who can help, and give them opportunities to tell their stories without revictimization," according to Amy Farrell, associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at Northeastern University, who led the study. "When this doesn't happen—as is the case with many victims of [human trafficking](#)—victims of crime grow to distrust [police](#), which in turn reduces the effectiveness of detecting and preventing crime."

Despite the important role of the police in engaging with [crime victims](#), past studies have shown that police commonly fall short in responding to the needs of this group, particularly victims of interpersonal violence. And although the field of law enforcement has increased training to improve responses to crime victims, studies evaluating the effectiveness of these efforts have overlooked questions about how well the police respond to and meet the needs of those who are victimized.

In this study, researchers identified human [trafficking](#) crimes as representing a unique opportunity to examine police responses to people

victimized by crime. Human trafficking is a crime involving recruiting and exploiting individuals by means of force, fraud, or coercion for the purposes of commercial sex, labor, or services. Despite advances in this field, police identification of victims of human trafficking remains low.

To determine why these victims may be reluctant to seek police assistance, researchers examined police responses to human trafficking crimes in three unnamed U.S. communities that varied in region, population size, and crime rates. They used data from a project that included information about 871 human trafficking incidents reported to the police between 2013 and 2016, and interviews with 23 law enforcement and 41 service providers who were involved with responding to human trafficking crimes.

Researchers found that many victims of human trafficking deal with complex trauma and have had negative experiences with the police, such as being arrested. Furthermore, human trafficking crimes are usually identified by nonspecialized officers who encounter victims during routine duties and are not trained to work with victims of this type of crime. As a result, victims of human trafficking are less likely to receive specialized services.

The study also identified victims' perceptions of police biases and stereotypes about them as factors that prevent victims from providing full details of the crimes in which they are involved to police, which further limits the ability of law enforcement to identify and respond in these cases.

The researchers also found that victims of human trafficking are less interested in seeking traditional forms of retributive justice for their traffickers, such as incarceration. Instead, they seek recognition of the crime, safety from future victimization, and the ability to move past their trauma, outcomes that are not typically addressed in their

interactions with police.

Among the recommendations made by the researchers:

- Front-line officers and investigators in non-trafficking units should be taught how to screen for and appropriately classify incidents of human trafficking.
- Comprehensive policies should be adopted to discourage police from arresting victims of human trafficking as a way to get them to provide evidence or ensure their safety.
- Police should adopt a victim-centered approach in their work with victims of human trafficking.
- Since many victims of human trafficking want assistance connecting with services in the community but few law enforcement agencies have specialized units dedicated to victim assistance, police should partner with service providers in the community and refer victims to these groups for support following report of a crime.
- Victims should be asked about their wishes for justice and offered approaches such as restorative justice.

"The police play a critical role in protecting victims of [crime](#) by building trust and meeting their needs," notes Meredith Dank, a research professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, who coauthored the study. "Victims of human trafficking need the police to recognize their humanity, promote their safety, and facilitate meaningful connections with service providers who can help restore victims to their places in their communities."

The study's authors note that their research is exploratory and qualitative, and that their findings are limited to the sites they studied. Also, the study did not include the experiences of victims of human trafficking, and the authors encourage future research to take into account their

voices.

More information: Amy Farrell et al, Failing victims? Challenges of the police response to human trafficking, *Criminology & Public Policy* (2019). [DOI: 10.1111/1745-9133.12456](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12456)

Provided by Crime and Justice Research Alliance

Citation: Human trafficking victims' unlikeliness to report crimes tied to police officers' bias (2019, August 1) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-08-human-trafficking-victims-unlikeliness-crimes.html>

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