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About Human Trafficking – Newsletter #15

Gang Involvement in Sex Trafficking

There is a sense from law enforcement that the involvement of gangs in sex trafficking of girls and women is increasing, though a recent Urban Institute study suggests this varies by locality across the country.

While much remains to be learned about gang involvement in trafficking, there is enough data to know it exists and for us to be cognizant of its implications. The involvement of gangs in sex trafficking is understandable from several perspectives.

First, gangs can be a substitute for families; they can provide a sense of belonging and protection. At the same time, violence, intimidation, control and coercion - hallmarks of trafficking - are inherent in gangs which also have traditionally viewed women as subservient.

From economic and risk perspectives there are a number of reasons for gangs to be attracted to sex trafficking:

- It is a high yield, low investment business enterprise, where victims can be easily replaced, and where they can be sold and resold on a daily basis
- It produces a steady stream of cash income that is not tied to one deal
- And it is perceived as low risk in terms of arrest/incarceration though it will be interesting to see if that changes as laws are toughened and enforced

In San Diego, gang involved sex trafficking has replaced drugs as the top cash source for gangs. And the tattooing or branding of the victim often illustrates that they are considered a product owned by the gang or gang member.

Gang involvement in trafficking can be varied:

- Providing security when girls and women are being transported, including across state lines
- Using victims to service gang members as well as non-gang members
- Using younger male gang members to recruit victims in their middle or high schools

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- The gang being actively involved in prostitution as an organized activity, or gang members pimping on their own
- Providing surveillance as the victim is engaged in gang-sponsored trafficking at a motel or a client's own home (out call) in gang controlled territory

The later, in particular, makes law enforcement's job in detecting and responding to trafficking even harder.

The role of "family" in gang related sex trafficking is also multi-faceted. Family members may be gang members themselves and loyal to gang sponsored activities. Family members may not be willing or able to acknowledge the minor's involvement in trafficking but may harbor suspicions. Or the victim's may be threatened with harm to her family if she reveals what is happening.

Some signs of minors involved in gang involved sex trafficking may include frequent absences from school, but the youth living at home. The youth may also go to school and come home for dinner but be trafficked before or after dinner.

The use of on-line and mobile technology is also facilitating gang related trafficking. The gang may recruit victims on line at social media sites, advertise services on the web via Backpage, and they may arrange a "date" by cell/text/IM, all without being visible on the street.

Safety concerns for the victim as well as our staff should be paramount when responding to potential situations of gang trafficking. The involvement of law enforcement seems especially warranted for everyone's safety in these situations.

The following resources may be of interest in learning more about the involvement of gangs, as well as the commercial sex economy:

AEquitasResource.org has a webinar in its training section on *Gang Related Violence, Exploitation, and Intimidation*

The Urban Institute (Urban.org) recently published Unearthing the Underground Commercial Sex Economy