

## Local Law Enforcement Officers' Knowledge of Human Trafficking: Ability to Define, Identify, and Assist

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### ABSTRACT

Local law enforcement officers have been identified as key figures in the fight against human trafficking, yet training has lagged, and their preparation to fulfill this role is unknown. Thus, 175 U.S. local law enforcement officers completed a survey assessing their ability to define human trafficking and to identify and assist its survivors. Approximately 17% of officers reported receiving training on human trafficking, while two thirds relied on mass media for information about human trafficking. Answers indicated confusion between human smuggling and human trafficking and a lack of knowledge of the elements of trafficking and who potential victims are. A substantial minority struggled to identify signs that a person might be a survivor of human trafficking and methods for intervention. Having received training and receiving information on trafficking from an official source significantly increased officers' knowledge base. These results strongly support the need for formal training of local law enforcement officers and provision of knowledge from law enforcement sources in order to be able to effectively combat human trafficking.

### KEYWORDS

Human trafficking;  
law enforcement training;  
local law enforcement;  
United States

As noted in the Federal Strategic Plan developed by the President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (2014), local law enforcement officers are key figures in the fight against human trafficking in the United States. Legislation alone has been found to be insufficient in increasing identification or prosecution of human-trafficking cases (Farrell, 2014; Farrell, Owens, & McDevitt, 2014); law enforcement officers must be able to utilize these laws to identify and intervene in cases of trafficking. Because of the complexity and secrecy of trafficking networks, local law enforcement officers are in many ways the best group to intervene due to their close ties with, and knowledge of, their communities (Farrell, McDevitt, & Fahy, 2008). These officers can intervene in local places of work, such as salons, restaurants, farms, and factories. They may come into contact with victims while they are in transport or working at locales such as truck stops and hotels. Thus, these first responders must be able to identify victims and to effectively intervene on their behalf. To do this successfully, officers must be trained on what trafficking is, how to approach survivors, and effective interview techniques because "The first contact law enforcement has with a victim can determine the success of the investigation" (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014, p. 59). If officers are not trained, they may ruin the chance at an investigation by using inappropriate methods (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014).

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Once survivors are identified, officers must be aware of services designed to aid them. The President's Interagency Task Force (2014) noted that it is "critically important that they [local law enforcement] know of services and immigration benefits available for victims of human trafficking" (p. 32). Continued presence can be requested for foreign-born survivors as well as the possibility of the "T" visa; this provides them with a case manager who can connect them with the same services available to a refugee, including legal assistance, medical care, and mental-health treatment, regardless of whether or not they entered with the appropriate documentation (U.S. Department of State, 2014). Domestic survivors of trafficking are eligible to receive the same services as other citizens through their status as a crime victim, including legal services, medical care, as well as mental-health services through social-service agencies. However, as they do not receive a case manager automatically, it can be more difficult for them to access services (Peters, 2013).

According to the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), the U.S. law that defines this crime, human trafficking includes three aspects: act, means, and purpose. The act encompasses the "recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining" of a person. The means is specified as "force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age," while the purpose is the type of exploitation: sex or labor (U.S. Health and Human Services, 2012, para. 3–4). Sex trafficking can include, but is not limited to, pornography, stripping, and prostitution, while labor trafficking may include domestic labor, construction, agricultural work, and manufacturing work.

As human trafficking continues to gain media attention, the number of stories has increased but often do not depict an accurate picture of it. These stories tend to focus on sensationalistic reports of sex trafficking that involve cases of force. As noted by Jahic and Finckenauer (2005), trafficking is often "packaged" in a way to be alarming and to catch the attention of the audience, including policy makers. This includes depictions of who is being trafficked and who is trafficking them. Framing theory, as applied to media, tells us that how the media frames an issue affects how it is perceived by the public. This is done through the use of "selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration" (Tankard, as cited in Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2015, p. 378). In the case of trafficking, this would include the decision to run a story, what type of trafficking is depicted, who is shown as its victims, and how they came to be trafficked. Media framing affects not only people's opinions on a topic but also their behavior regarding it (Griffin et al., 2015). Thus, when considering the impact of media framing of human trafficking on police officers, it can shape their views of what trafficking is, as well as who it affects and how. This underscores the need for officers to have a full and accurate understanding of this crime in order to fulfill their duties.

However, as of 2014, only 32 states mandated or even encouraged training of law enforcement officers on this crime (Polaris, 2015). Research regarding the training of local law enforcement has found that few receive information regarding human trafficking (Farrell, 2012; Farrell, McDevitt, & Fahy, 2010; Farrell et al., 2014; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Grubb & Bennett, 2012). Studies suggest that this gap has massive implications for the fight against trafficking. While officers have frequent contact with trafficking victims, lack of training means that they are not always aware that they are interacting with a victim, and this lack has been blamed for the large gap between the number of estimated and identified trafficking survivors (Farrell et al., 2008; Irazola, Williamson, Chen, Garrett, & Clawson, 2008; Renzetti, Bush, Castellanos, & Hunt, 2015). Farrell and Pfeffer state that if officers "do not understand what human trafficking is, they do not prioritize its identification" (2014, p. 50).

Training of officers has been linked to understanding the legal definition of human trafficking (Newton, Mulcahy, & Martin, 2008). In contrast, lack of training means they are often unable to identify trafficking or lack skills to investigate it and may use existing schemas from other crimes (e.g., prostitution) or mass-media stereotypes (Farrell, Pfeffer, & Bright, 2015). They may be unaware of the legal definition of trafficking, believing, for example, that movement may be required, or that it only occurs in the United States to undocumented immigrants (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Farrell et al., 2015). Newton et al. found that officers were generally unaware that juvenile involvement in prostitution was trafficking. Labor trafficking, in particular, is underidentified, due to the focus on sex trafficking (Barrick, Lattimore, Pitts, & Zhang, 2014; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). While investigations and prosecutions have predominately been for sex trafficking, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) report serving higher numbers of labor-trafficking survivors (U.S. Department of State, 2012).

Compounding the lack of officer identification is that survivors themselves often do not self-identify for reasons including fear of arrest, threat of bodily harm, or psychological ties to their trafficker (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). They may be unfamiliar with the term “human trafficking” and therefore do not realize they are victims of this crime (Irazola et al., 2008). They may come from countries where corruption is rife, making them untrusting of law enforcement; they may be fearful of repercussions to themselves or their families, embarrassed, blame themselves or not view themselves as victims. U.S. minors may fear being returned to an abusive family or to foster care (Irazola et al., 2008). Victims may fear, if they identify themselves to law enforcement, they will be charged as criminals. Due to confusion between human smuggling and human trafficking, foreign-born survivors may be viewed only as “illegals,” while citizens may find themselves charged with a crime such as prostitution.

Local law enforcement are essential in order to combat human trafficking, but, in order to do so effectively, they must be trained so they have an accurate knowledge base. Since research has found that many are not being trained and states are lagging in their requirements to do so, the question arises of what is the knowledge base with which officers are functioning—what are they learning and from where—and how does that impact their ability to assist survivors of this crime? Grubb and Bennett (2012) surveyed the top law enforcement officer in each agency in Georgia to assess their level of awareness regarding the definition of trafficking. These officers were asked to self-rate their level of awareness using closed-ended questions; the accuracy of that knowledge was not assessed. Newton et al. (2008), in their nationwide survey of law enforcement knowledge of human trafficking, also surveyed either the top officer or the person they identified as “most knowledgeable.”

These studies, while providing a preliminary knowledge base, did not include those most likely to encounter human trafficking—the frontline officers. Frontline officers are the most likely to come across this crime in the course of their everyday duties and are identified as “key figures” by the President’s Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (2014). Therefore, the following study was conducted to assess the knowledge of all officers. The goal was to determine the sources of officer knowledge on human trafficking and how that affects their ability to define, to identify, and to assist survivors of trafficking. Specific questions were the following:

- (1) How do law enforcement officers define trafficking in their own words and how well does that correlate with the TVPA definition?
- (2) How well are officers able to describe the range of those who may be trafficked and signs of trafficking?
- (3) How do officers describe handling a case of possible trafficking and are they aware of possible services for survivors?
- (4) How are the above abilities to define, to identify, and to assist affected by the source of officer knowledge about human trafficking?

## Methodology

The current study was conducted using a convenience sample of eight police departments in a Mid-Atlantic state; five were located in suburban/rural areas and three in cities. In this state, training for law enforcement officers on human trafficking was not mandated at the time of the study. The anonymous survey was developed by the researchers to assess the desired knowledge and primarily had open-ended questions (specified in the “Results” section) in order to gather the officers’ knowledge base in their own words. Yes/no questions were used to indicate whether officers believed survivors could access specified services.

It was decided to use a paper survey so that it could be administered at the same time to participants and in the belief that it would garner fuller answers. The survey was e-mailed to a departmental liaison and the departments themselves decided how to distribute the survey. While

the specifics are unknown to the researchers, the majority stated they requested participation during roll call. Data collection for urban departments was conducted a few months after the administration of surveys in the suburban/rural region departments. Some alterations were made to the survey questions for clarification for the second round of surveys and are noted in the relevant sections. This study was approved by the institutional review board of the researchers' institution.

### Sample

While eight departments participated, one urban department's data were excluded because when they reproduced the survey, pages were missing resulting in a large amount of missing data. Thus, in the seven included departments, 176 officers returned this survey with an overall response rate of 54%; response rates within departments ranged from 41–88%. One survey was removed from the dataset as the quality of answers made it clear that the respondent did not answer seriously, resulting in a final sample of 175. The vast majority of respondents were Caucasian males, with an average age of 39 and a mean length of law enforcement experience of 13.23 years. Over half of officers were from urban police departments and the most commonly identified rank was Officer. See Table 1 for full demographics. Some officers did not answer all demographic questions and, therefore, not all categories will total 175 due to missing data.

**Table 1.** Demographics of Respondents.

	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Sex		
Male	151	89
Female	18	11
Race/ethnicity		
Caucasian	162	93
African American	6	3
Latino	4	2
Asian American	1	1
Other	2	1
Title		
Officer	129	74
Sergeant	15	9
Detective	11	7
Lieutenant	5	3
Other	11	6
Level of highest education completed		
High School	48	27
Associate's Degree	44	25
Bachelor's Degree	60	34
Master's Degree	10	6
Other	12	7
Field of highest degree		
Criminal Justice	79	45
Other	44	25
n/a	50	29
Region		
Urban	91	52
Suburban/Rural	84	48
Age		
Range 24–59,		
<i>M</i> = 38.92 years ( <i>SD</i> = 9.86)		
Experience in field		
Range: 0–35,		
<i>M</i> = 13.23 years ( <i>SD</i> = 8.64)		
Experience in current department		
Range: 0–35,		
<i>M</i> = 11.06 years ( <i>SD</i> = 7.86)		

Note. Not all percentages equal 100 due to rounding; not all fields equal 175 due to missing data.

## Data analysis

Due to the descriptive nature of the study, correlations and bivariate statistics were utilized for quantitative analysis. Qualitative analysis was conducted utilizing N\*VIVO. A grounded theory approach framed the coding approach. The first two authors reviewed the answers separately and developed the coding scheme, which was then reconciled between the two (open coding). They then separately coded the data utilizing the developed coding scheme (axial coding). The codes were then compared and differences reconciled through discussion.

## Results

### Sources of information

Only 17% ( $n = 29$ ) of respondents reported receiving training on human trafficking. Frontline officers were more likely to be trained,  $X^2 = 13.401$ ,  $p = .001$ . A very weak curvilinear relationship was found between the number of years in the field for officers and having received training in human trafficking ( $\eta = .198$ ). Trained officers tended to be the most experienced, as two thirds had 10 or more years of experience, while 31% ( $n = 9$ ) had 0 to 5 years in the field, and only one officer with between 6 and 10 years in the field received training. Most officers received training from a law enforcement source, such as the police academy or annual update training ( $n = 3$ ) or federal law enforcement, that is, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE;  $n = 3$ ) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI;  $n = 1$ ). Other sources included online resources ( $n = 2$ ), a one-day class attended at a local college, and a one-hour long conference course. Eight trained officers described “brief” trainings, while two officers described short-term trainings that were administered over 1 hour or 1 day.

Officers were asked to identify where they had heard about human trafficking (“From which sources have you heard about human trafficking [please list all you can remember]”). Their answers were coded into “official” and “unofficial” sources, where official sources included training, law enforcement publications, and officials, while unofficial sources included magazines, movies, and other mass media, as well as church. Almost two thirds of officers (62%;  $n = 108$ ) noted mass media (including the movie “Taken”) as their only source of information about human trafficking. While simply “media” was a common response ( $n = 20$ ), it also included television (46%;  $n = 88$ ), news (37%,  $n = 65$ ), print sources, such as newspapers and magazines ( $n = 29$ ), and the Internet ( $n = 19$ ). Fewer than one third of officers (29%;  $n = 51$ ) included at least one official source, including training ( $n = 23$ ), sources in law enforcement ( $n = 14$ ), other agencies ( $n = 5$ , i.e., FBI, ICE, and the State Police), and law enforcement publications ( $n = 19$ ). There was no significant difference between urban and suburban/rural departments on whether or not they reported having received training nor in the use of official/unofficial sources and, therefore, location was not included as a variable in further analyses.

Only 8% ( $n = 14$ ) stated they had experience with human trafficking. Of those officers who elaborated, six noted experiences related to sex trafficking, while three noted an experience related to labor trafficking; only one response included both sex and labor trafficking. Four of the officers with experience with sex trafficking primarily focused on foreign-born prostitutes. Similarly, labor trafficking was largely described in terms of immigrant workers or foreign-born individuals. Officers described “large amounts of undocumented Chinese restaurant workers” as well as Hispanic workers who were “working off a debt.”

### Ability to define human trafficking

Officers were asked in an open-ended question to define human trafficking. These answers were compared to the official definition from the TVPA and were coded on a scale of 0–3. A low-quality definition demonstrated no understanding (0), for example, confusion with human smuggling or

“Trafficking of humans,” or a very basic definition of human trafficking (1), such as “Selling someone into slavery.” A medium-level definition was coded as a 2 and included mostly correct acts, means, and purposes for human trafficking but lacked some important points, such as the specific terminology defined by the TVPA for act or means or a description of the two main types of exploitation, for example, “Utilizing human beings against their will to performs [*sic*] jobs such as prostitution, slave labor.” A 3 showed a solid understanding of human trafficking, including all three parts of the TVPA, for example, “A crime against humanity involving recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring, or receiving persons through the use of force for the purpose of exploiting them.”

The majority of officers (71%;  $n = 125$ ) provided a low-quality definition. Eleven percent of officers ( $n = 20$ ) had confusion between human smuggling and human trafficking. For some, this was in part ( $n = 8$ ) by mixing in smuggling concepts with trafficking, such as “The illegal harboring and moving of people for money either against their will or at their request to enter the country”; for others it was in whole ( $n = 12$ ) by defining human trafficking as human smuggling, such as “bringing non U.S. citizens into the country illegally.” Only 22% ( $n = 39$ ) of officers provided a medium-level definition, and an even smaller percentage (6%;  $n = 11$ ) provided a high-level definition of trafficking. There was no significant relationship between having received training in human trafficking and the quality of definition provided. However, there was a significant relationship between whether the officer reported receiving information from an official source and the quality of their definition,  $X^2_{(6)} = 23.40, p = .001$ .

To further gauge the understanding of human trafficking among officers, the suburban and rural officers were asked to “Briefly describe the different types of trafficking as best you can.” Surveys administered to urban police officers changed the question to specify “human trafficking,” due to some confusion in the first round of surveys when drug and gun trafficking were included. While half of officers (51%;  $n = 90$ ) included both sex and labor trafficking in their answers, some officers only mentioned one type: sex trafficking ( $n = 26$ ) or labor trafficking ( $n = 11$ ). Overall, 67% ( $n = 118$ ) of officers mentioned sex trafficking, compared with 46% ( $n = 80$ ) of officers who mentioned labor trafficking in this question. Officers also included other forms of trafficking not currently defined under the TVPA, including for adoption ( $n = 4$ ) and medical/organ trafficking ( $n = 6$ ), as well as gun trafficking ( $n = 3$ ) and drug trafficking ( $n = 21$ ). There was a significant relationship between whether the officer reported receiving information from an official source and the types of human trafficking (only sex or labor compared to both sex and labor),  $X^2_{(6)} = 16.29, p = .012$ , but not with whether they had been trained or not.

### **Ability to identify trafficking**

Officers were asked to list risk factors for becoming a victim, who they thought would be potential victims, as well as potential signs that could indicate trafficking. Common themes included focusing on presentations of fear or emotional behavior as a sign of victimization and women, youth, and foreign nationals as potential victims. When asked to list risk factors for being trafficked, some officers listed risk factors and others listed results of having been trafficked, such as death or arrest, showing a possible misunderstanding of the question. Answers listing such results of human trafficking were excluded from analysis.

Risk factors were coded into two categories: demographic risk factors, including age and sex, and situational vulnerabilities, such as homelessness or poverty. The three most common risk factors were low socioeconomic status (27%), being foreign (14%), and having no family or friends (11%). Being a runaway followed closely behind (9%). Other factors mentioned were being female, homeless, lacking employment opportunities, and having little education. There was a significant difference between the number of risk factors listed by trained officers ( $M = 2.14, SD = 1.977$ ) and untrained officers ( $M = 1.23, SD = 1.476$ ),  $t(35) = -2.339, p = .025$ , as well as by source of information, official ( $M = 2.55$ ) or unofficial ( $M = 1.81$ ),  $t_{(157)} = -2.547, p = .012$ .

When officers were asked “Who is a potential victim of human trafficking?,” most officers showed a good understanding. About one third of officers (29%) correctly noted that “anyone” can be a victim of human trafficking. However, many officers also included a variety of demographic variables that could characterize potential victims. Children or youth were most common (41%), followed by women (34%), compared to only one officer who noted men could be potential victims. Foreign nationals were often noted as potential victims (27%,  $n = 47$ ); almost half of these officers (46.8%,  $n = 22$ ) described foreign nationals as undocumented. Some potential victims were described by their social vulnerabilities—the most common being low socioeconomic status (14%). Employment in prostitution ( $n = 5$ ), being a victim of kidnapping ( $n = 5$ ), emotional vulnerability (e.g., quiet, easily influenced;  $n = 2$ ), and lacking family ( $n = 2$ ) were also mentioned by officers. Drug use or abuse was noted as an indicator of potential victimization ( $n = 12$ ); drug dependence was noted as a risk factor ( $n = 14$ ) as well as a sign of victimization ( $n = 6$ ).

These descriptions were coded into four groups: unable to answer (0), women and children only (1), inclusion of strong demographic categories (2), and anyone (3). The descriptions as coded were significantly related to officers’ source of information, official/unofficial:  $X^2_{(3)} = 20.34$ ,  $p = .000$ , as well as the quality of definition given (low, medium, high),  $X^2_{(9)} = 80.21$ ,  $p = .000$ , though not whether officers had been trained.

Asked to name signs that a person may be a victim of human trafficking, approximately half of officers (57%;  $n = 100$ ) provided a variety of types of signs of victimization, categorized by the researchers as demographic, physical, behavioral, and circumstantial/situational, while the other 43% ( $n = 75$ ) either left the question blank (17%;  $n = 30$ ), stated they did not know (15%;  $n = 27$ ) or named only one sign of trafficking ( $n = 18$ ). The types of signs did not vary by training or source of information, but the number of signs provided varied significantly with both trained officers,  $t_{(173)} = -2.28$ ,  $p = .024$ , and those who received information from an official source able to provide more signs,  $t_{(157)} = -2.55$ ,  $p = .012$ .

Demographic signs focused on being foreign ( $n = 12$ ) and lacking English-language skills ( $n = 18$ ). Relatively few officers ( $n = 5$ ) noted being a minor as a potential sign of a trafficking victim, and only two noted being a runaway. Behavioral signs included emotional behavior (noted by 31%), such as acting submissive, fearful, showing signs of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or looking depressed or anxious. Unspecified fear was included by 19% of officers, while fear of law enforcement was mentioned by 11% of officers.

A broad variety of physical signs were noted, but most commonly mentioned were signs of physical abuse (16%), described as bruises, cuts, and burns. Other officers included general appearance ( $n = 14$ ), looking foreign ( $n = 8$ ), or signs of neglect ( $n = 12$ ), such as malnourishment or emaciation. Some officers took a broad perspective on the circumstances in which the individual may be found, noting being new to the area, lacking family or friends in the area, or having little knowledge of the area in which they are living ( $n = 16$ ). While being foreign was a commonly mentioned demographic sign of being trafficking, officers’ discussion of the lack of official identification documents did not necessarily link a potential victim with being foreign-born; fewer than half of officers ( $n = 9$ ) who described a lack of or fake identification documents linked this concept with being foreign-born, possibly suggesting understanding that identification documents can be confiscated by traffickers among domestic victims as well. Living conditions ( $n = 17$ ), including lack of permanent address, crowded living conditions, or unsanitary living conditions, as well as working conditions ( $n = 5$ ), such as where an individual works, how one is paid, or even how one is transported to a workplace, were mentioned. Prostitution was mentioned as an indicator of trafficking by 12 officers. Only 1 participant noted owing a large debt to an employer as a sign.

When asked “What are some places you would potentially find a victim of human trafficking working,” officers described a variety of possible sites. The majority of officers (87%) were able to provide some locations where human trafficking can occur; the other 13% of officers either left this question blank ( $n = 13$ ), or noted they did not know ( $n = 9$ ). In all, almost half of the officers ( $n = 73$ ; 42%) provided a mix of sex- and labor-trafficking locations. While more officers had mentioned sex trafficking in their definitions and descriptions of types of human trafficking, almost twice as many

officers ( $n = 43$ ) listed only labor locales than did officers who listed only sex-trafficking locales ( $n = 24$ ). In addition, officers, overall, mentioned more locations where labor trafficking could be found (170 mentions) than where sex trafficking could be found (109 mentions). The most commonly mentioned labor location was agricultural (23%). Thirty-nine participants described factories, warehouses, or businesses including nail salons ( $n = 14$ ). Restaurants and other food-industry locations, such as poultry-processing plants, were mentioned by 21% of officers and sweatshops by 11%. In terms of sex-trafficking locations, massage parlors were included by 22% ( $n = 38$ ) of officers, followed by brothels ( $n = 23$ ), strip clubs ( $n = 15$ ), the street (for prostitution) ( $n = 13$ ), and hotels and motels ( $n = 12$ ).

Less commonly mentioned sites included construction or landscaping ( $n = 6$ ), the service industry ( $n = 5$ ), bars ( $n = 4$ ), private homes ( $n = 6$ ), as well as services and agencies selling sexual services ( $n = 9$ ). Only a small percentage of officers (7.4%;  $n = 13$ ) noted that sex and labor trafficking could be found anywhere. Those who reported receiving information on human trafficking from an official source were significantly more likely to include both sex and labor locales in their answer,  $X^2(5) = 11.47$ ,  $p = .04$ ; training was not correlated with this variable.

### **Ability to assist a survivor**

When asked, “How would you handle a situation in which you suspected that you were interacting with someone who was a victim of human trafficking,” almost one quarter of officers (23.4%) were unable to answer (skipped question or wrote “I don’t know”). Responses that were given were coded into two categories: contacting others and taking action. One third of officers stated they would take action, while one quarter said they would contact others, while a little fewer than one quarter noted both. Trained officers were more likely to both act and contact as opposed to untrained officers who were more likely to only contact; act only and leaving it blank were approximately equal between the groups,  $X^2_{(3)} = 13.02$ ,  $p = .005$ . Use of official sources was not significantly related to this variable.

In contacting others, most participants focused on contacting others with more clout, training, resources, or knowledge about human trafficking, most commonly federal law enforcement, that is, ICE ( $n = 15$ ) or the FBI ( $n = 5$ ). Of those who would contact another agency, officers noted agencies involved with the investigation of the specific incident, such as the Criminal Investigative Department (CID), the “proper” or “appropriate” agency, or social service/victims’ service agencies. Only 2 officers included more specific agencies: 1 included a domestic violence shelter, and another included Special Victims Counselors (SVCS), the YWCA, and a victim hotline (not the human-trafficking hotline). The involvement of translators was mentioned with the assumption that it would be needed, for example, “attempt communication via translator or language line.”

The most common actions were to engage the victim (63%;  $n = 111$ ), either to interview, talk to the potential victim, take the person aside or gather more information about the individual and the situation. Officers said that in order to gather more information and to interview the individual, they would take such actions as taking the person aside or in private, removing the individual from the threatening environment, and attempting to build rapport with the individual (either stated specifically or through actions they stated were to establish rapport). A few officers noted they would ascertain citizenship status, complete a criminal history background check or arrest/detain the victim. Of those who said they would interview the individual, 77% ( $n = 40$ ) of them had not received training. Officers both with ( $n = 12$ ) and without ( $n = 15$ ) training noted uncooperativeness or fear of law enforcement as barriers to reporting yet still noted that they would engage the potential victim.

In terms of understanding barriers to assistance, 95% ( $n = 166$ ) of officers provided some answer when asked “What are some reasons that trafficking victims would not ask for help, even if they are in contact with police, social service provider or a medical professional?” Almost half of the officers



(46%;  $n = 80$ ) could provide only one reason a victim may not ask for help, while the other half of officers included two or more reasons. The number of reasons listed was positively affected by training,  $t_{(173)} = -2.33, p = .021$ , and use of official sources,  $t_{(157)} = -3.03, p = .003$ . Fear was the most common category of reason noted and included a number of different things that the person may fear, including harm to self or family. Other barriers were included as well, including language barriers and the relationship with the trafficker (see Table 2 for detail).

Officers were asked yes/no questions as to whether or not they believed that survivors of human trafficking were able to access medical, mental health, and legal services, as well as if survivors who had entered the country without proper documentation had the right to remain (see Table 3). They were then given space and asked to explain why they selected this answer. Only officers in the urban departments were asked separately about available legal, medical, and mental-health services for foreign and domestic survivors of human trafficking. When asked if foreign victims of human trafficking who entered the country illegally had the legal right to remain in the United States, 48% of officers believed they could not, while 30% said they could and 19% did not know. The most

**Table 2.** Why a Victim May Not Ask for Help.

Category	Total	%
Fears	159	91
Harm to self	53	37
Harm to family	49	28
Of deportation	28	16
Of police	10	6
Of trafficker(s)	20	11
Of retaliation	15	10
Of returning home	6	3
Of potential consequences	3	2
Social	55	31
Language barrier	14	8
Relationship with trafficking/brainwashed	17	10
Illegal alien in the U.S.	11	8
Lacking resources	6	3
Drug addiction	4	2
Reliance on money sent home	2	1
Unfamiliar with surroundings	1	1

**Table 3.** Victims' Ability to Access Services.

	Right to remain	Medical Services			Mental-Health Services			Legal Services		
		All	Foreign	Domestic	All	Foreign	Domestic	All	Foreign	Domestic
Total Yes	53	69	70	73	62	60	68	62	55	68
No specification	11	23	25	43	22	24	43	22	25	46
Everyone is	0	13	16	8	17	11	5	17	6	3
Local agencies/NGOs	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	2	2	1
Right as criminal	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0
Seeking asylum	9	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	2	0
Temporarily	5	2	3	0	3	4	0	2	3	0
TVPA	5	3	0	0	2	0	0	2	0	0
Victim services	8	6	4	10	5	4	8	8	10	8
Other	15	22	20	12	11	14	11	6	7	10
Total No	81	7	9	3	9	11	4	9	12	4
No specification	40	4	6	3	5	6	4	5	9	4
Personal beliefs	7	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0
Did not enter legally/do not have legal status	24	2	2	0	2	3	0	2	1	0
Other	10	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0
Blank	7	1	3	9	1	6	9	1	8	8
Don't know	34	7	9	6	12	14	10	12	16	11
Total	175	84	91	91	84	91	91	84	91	91

common reason given for why foreign survivors could not remain was that they had entered illegally. Those who stated they could were likely to reference seeking asylum.

When asked if survivors of human trafficking are eligible for medical and mental-health services, most officers stated they could access these services. Most of these officers did not specify why, but common responses included that “everyone” is eligible to receive these services, that as a victim of a crime they have access to medical services, and that services rendered would be temporary. Of those who said foreign survivors could not access these services, the most common answer reiterated what most officers had previously stated: Because the foreign survivor had not entered legally and did not have legal status, they could not access the services, for example, “Go through the process like everyone else should to become a legal alien.” While some officers said domestic survivors could not access these services, none specified a reason.

Similarly, the majority of officers said that survivors could access legal services, most commonly because “everyone” has this right. Other officers noted that services were granted because they were a crime victim. A small percentage of officers noted that foreign victims could not access legal services, noting personal beliefs ( $n = 2$ ) and not having entered legally ( $n = 3$ ) as reasons, for example, “not U. S. citizens” and foreign victims “shouldn’t” be eligible for such services.

Overall, only five officers total were able to name the TVPA, directly or indirectly, or refer to the T-Visa when asked about survivors’ rights to remain in the country and service eligibility. There was no significant relationship between knowledge of the availability of services and whether the officer had received training or their source of information on trafficking.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the level of knowledge of human trafficking among local law enforcement officers, specifically their ability to define, to identify, and to assist victims of this crime and the correlation of this knowledge with the source of their knowledge about trafficking. The inclusion of all officers in a department and not just the highest ranking officer adds to the knowledge base by including those most likely to encounter this crime in their everyday duties. The results supported previous research that officers lack training; fewer than 20% of officers reported having received training on this issue and two thirds were reliant on mass media of their sole source of information. Thus, it is not surprising that officers struggled to answer some questions and relied on media stereotypes for their personal beliefs for answers. These results were supportive of framing theory in that officers who were reliant on mass media had significantly less accurate knowledge than those who had received training and/or used official sources.

Drawing from experience with IPV laws, it is to be expected that law enforcement knowledge of legislation and what is needed to establish probable cause in these cases will lag behind (Eigenberg, Kappeler, & McGuffee, 2012). Forty years later, training and knowledge is much more common on IPV, though the quantity and quality varies greatly (Eigenberg et al., 2012). Adherence to belief in traditional gender roles may affect who is seen as a victim of trafficking, similar to what has been found with IPV (O’Dell, 2007). Since police officers are overwhelmingly male, they may be less likely to perceive a male as a victim of a crime, such as IPV or trafficking.

Among these officers, there existed the common misconceptions about human trafficking including that trafficking victims are foreign-born, that transportation is required, and some confusion with human smuggling, correlating with the research conducted by Farrell and Pfeffer (2014) and Farrell et al. (2015). Other common misconceptions existed about victims of trafficking, such as the belief that victims of human trafficking will present with signs of physical bondage. In some questions, officers seemed to focus on sex trafficking (especially

adult prostitution), suggesting their reliance on mass media. Farrell et al. (2015) noted that officers tended to sort trafficking knowledge into existing schema of other crimes, including prostitution.

These results strongly support the need for formal training so that officers are better able to assist victims and to stop traffickers. Training in this sample correlated with variables important for identifying potential victims, including an increased number of signs of trafficking, risk factors provided, and why a survivor would not ask for help. Trained officers were also better able to answer the question on how they would respond to a suspected case of trafficking by listing both how they would act and who they would contact.

More officers reported use of an official source for their knowledge about trafficking than reported having received training, and official sources had an impact on a higher number of variables including officers' ability to accurately define trafficking, knowledge of both labor and sex trafficking and their locales, who can be trafficked, listing signs of trafficking, and reasons why a survivor would not ask for help. This knowledge also appears to have a flow-down effect as the quality of their definition was then related to who they said could be trafficked. If officers are not aware of who is a potential victim of trafficking, they will not be able to assess all people as possible victims. Further research is needed into why this variable appeared to better prepare officers in order to address rival hypotheses such as a Type II error from the low number of trained officers or that the trainings were too brief to allow the full amount of information that the officer needs.

Being able to accurately define trafficking will help officers better identify victims. As a group, officers were able to identify a broad variety of signs that could indicate human trafficking; however, almost one third of officers were unable to list any signs. There has been increasing attention to U.S. children who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation and some of this was reflected in officers' answers, by listing children as a vulnerable group. However, no officer noted that force, fraud, or coercion are not needed for sex trafficking of a minor, supporting the research by Newton et al. (2008) that found that officers typically did not know that juvenile involvement in prostitution is trafficking. This raises the concern that officers may not be aware of this fact and, since they are receiving their information from the media, thus believe that this occurs only through force. This underscores the need for a thorough understanding of the definition of trafficking and who is defined as being trafficked by it.

Understanding why victims may not ask for help is equally important to identifying and intervening on behalf of a victim. Fear was commonly noted as a reason a person might not ask for help, even when interacting with an officer, supporting the research by Farrell and Pfeffer (2014) in which officers reported not expecting survivors to self-identify. While officers were correct in noting this fear, it is still important to train officers about other emotional dynamics that are often involved in human trafficking, especially in domestic cases. Only 1 officer in the study noted the important fact that victims may not perceive themselves as being trafficked. Relatively few citizens are aware of the complexities of human trafficking; therefore, it makes sense that trafficked individuals may not be able to identify themselves as crime victims.

While actions, such as engaging the potential victim in questioning, talking with the person alone, building rapport, easing the person's fears, and treating the victim with patience and compassion, are positive, effective action can be better assured by training; the majority of officers who said they would engage the potential victim lacked training and had previously noted that victims may fear or mistrust law enforcement and be uncooperative to intervention. Ineffective first contact can doom a potential case (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). Farrell and Pfeffer note that improper interview techniques, such as pressuring the survivor to give too much information during the first interview, can derail the entire investigation, supporting the need for training in "trauma-informed and victim-centered" interview techniques for officers (Farrell et al., 2014, p. 155). A few officers stated their only action would be to assess the person's

immigration status, an action noted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (2006) as one that should never be a first step. Answers also lacked knowledge of important resources available to officers and survivors, such as the National Human Trafficking Hotline and the local anti-trafficking task forces. One quarter of officers were unable to list any action they could take when confronted with a case of suspected trafficking.

Knowledge of resources is still lacking, a “critically important” piece of knowledge according to the President’s Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (2014, p. 32). Confusion about eligibility for services among foreign and domestic victims was common among officers. Only five officers were able to name the TVPA or refer to the T-Visa when asked about the legal right to remain in the country as a human-trafficking survivor and eligibility for services. Officers should receive training about the T-Visa and the services it can unlock to help foreign survivors recover from the trauma they have experienced. Additionally, they should be made aware of specific agencies that can assist all survivors, domestic and foreign, as well as the trafficking hotline and the local task forces. Officers were more likely to state that domestic survivors can access services, but it can actually be easier for foreign victims to access them due to the provision of a case manager and not needing to navigate disparate systems (Peters, 2013). Training would also help officers not be reliant on their personal opinions for knowledge.

Officers in this sample showed gaps in knowledge, even after receiving training. This may be due to the fact that a number of officers described the training as “brief.” Effective training must cover a number of points, and officers could benefit from understanding the common misconceptions that characterize human-trafficking knowledge. It is important that trainings comprehensively address human trafficking, its victims, and intervention methods and should be specific to the type of officer. Renzetti et al. (2015) note that different types of training may be necessary for different levels of officers, for example, frontline versus executive, and that both content and delivery method should be considered. Additionally, training can be integrated in different ways depending on the level and responsibilities of the officer, such as during police academy, during in-service training, or more detailed training for those serving on task forces or in specialized units. The sessions on human trafficking offered by the National Criminal Justice Training center are three days long each for an overview of human trafficking and for interviewing potentially exploited children, reflecting the complexity of these issues.

Limitations of this study include the small sample size and geographical constraints. While three departments had almost 100% participation, approximately half of officers from the other departments completed it. The region in which the study was conducted is agricultural, which may account for the high number of officers noting agriculture as a possible labor-trafficking site. This answer is not incorrect but may affect generalizability of the findings to other regions. The low number of officers who had received training may have caused a Type II error in assessing its impact. This may also be related to the fact that even among those who had been trained, for many it was brief. However, despite these limitations, this study does offer knowledge in an area that is desperately needed—the knowledge base officers are using in fighting trafficking. This study expanded beyond other studies in that it sought to survey all officers within a department, not just the top-ranking officer or the person identified as “most knowledgeable,” but rather including the people who may encounter this crime in the course of other duties and have been identified as key figures by the President’s Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (2014). The state in which this study was conducted has now added an online 3-hour training for all officers, which should significantly improve officer knowledge. Though it is not differentiated by type of officer, the description does include both sex and labor, as well as noting that all types of people can be trafficked.

The results of this study support that training positively impacts officers' accurate knowledge of human trafficking and their ability to assist its survivors. In the absence of training, or supplementing it, providing officers with another official source of knowledge also helps increase knowledge and reduce reliance on mass-media stereotypes and personal beliefs. As human trafficking continues to gain media attention, local law enforcement must have accurate information about this crime, including how to define it as well as how to effectively identify and assist victims. These officers are an essential piece of the fight against this crime as they frequently encounter trafficking in the course of other investigations. Therefore, it is necessary that they are given the necessary information to most effectively carry out their duties. The human costs of this crime are incalculable and law enforcement needs all available tools to fight it.

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