

2021

Human Trafficking and Its Evolution into Cyberspace: How Has Technology Transformed Human Trafficking Over Time?

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Recommended Citation

Landron, Gabriela, "Human Trafficking and Its Evolution into Cyberspace: How Has Technology Transformed Human Trafficking Over Time?" (2021). *Honors Undergraduate Theses*. 1062.
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HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND ITS EVOLUTION INTO CYBERSPACE: HOW
HAS TECHNOLOGY TRANSFORMED HUMAN TRAFFICKING OVER
TIME?

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Sciences
In the Department of Criminal Justice
in the College of Community Innovation and Education
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term, 2021

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, with the rise of technology, human trafficking has transformed into one of the largest clandestine crimes globally. Though the relationship between human trafficking and technology has gained attention over recent years, the empirical research on this topic is still underdeveloped. As such, the relationship between technological developments and the rise of human trafficking remains unanswered. Within this frame of reference, this research aims to explore this relationship to better understand how human trafficking has flourished in cyberspace and is beginning to depend on technological advancements for predation by using a content analysis of newspaper articles. After outlining key terms concerning human trafficking in the context of sex trafficking, the present research then examines articles overtime to see the progression of human trafficking in cyberspace. News articles were chosen because they serve as the primary source of information about historical and current events.

Keywords: human trafficking, sex trafficking, technology, Internet

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INTRODUCTION: TECHNOLOGY OR CYBERSPACE USED TO FACILITATE HUMAN TRAFFICKING

“Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery in which traffickers use force, fraud, or coercion to control victims for the purpose of engaging in commercial sex acts or labor services against his/her will” (Human Trafficking Hotline, 2021, paras. 1). It is an ever-evolving concern for law enforcement and the criminal justice system. There are four stages of trafficking which include: the recruitment, transportation, exploitation of victims, and the management of illicit profits (Aronowitz, 2009). Throughout each of these four stages of the trafficking cycle, offenders use digital technologies. These digital technologies are used to facilitate their trade and exploit a larger number of victims. Estimates from the International Labour Organization (2014) suggest that human trafficking is a \$150 billion global industry, with \$99 billion coming from commercial sexual exploitation. In other words, sex trafficking is the largest and most profitable category of human trafficking.

“In the last thirty years, traffickers have misused every technological advancement to help them exploit their victims and force them into labor and sex trafficking” (Richmond, 2019, paras. 7). The three main technologies this paper will focus on are: (1) Internet - used to recruit and advertise on websites; social media, private chat rooms, and video games; (2) Smartphones - used to monitor victims’ movements, control their actions, and keep tabs on their victims; and (3) Financial systems - wire transfers; facilitates the movement of money.

Anecdotal stories of human trafficking conducted through cyberspace, such as the recent Wayfair scandal (e.g., Brown, 2020), are abundant. What is lacking in the empirical literature, however, is a systematic assessment of how human traffickers use technology and cyberspace. Thus, the current study attempts to fill this gap in knowledge by providing a content analysis of

newspaper articles over time in order to understand how human trafficking has evolved as technological capabilities advance. The next section examines key terminology and statistics of human trafficking in relation to sex trafficking, what tactics are employed by human traffickers, as well as outlining the role cyberspace and technology has in human trafficking - specifically the internet, smartphones, and financial systems. Subsequently, the following section provides an analysis of technological changes over time in advertisements and articles in relation to human trafficking.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globalization has facilitated sex labor and increased its market. Sex trafficking has become codependent with technology. Verham (2015) states that “[n]either the Internet nor sex trafficking would look like it does today without its counterpart” (p. 4). Knowing this interaction is paramount to understanding technology used by perpetrators of human trafficking and is fundamental in its prevention and intervention. It is assumed that the same technology used by traffickers can be utilized by law enforcement and the criminal justice community to hinder their market. Some researchers believe that tools such as data mining, mapping, computational linguistics, and advanced analytics could also be used by anti trafficking organizations to prevent, protect, and prosecute against human trafficking (Laterno, 2011). Yet, little empirical research supports this notion (Boyd et al. 2011). Though improving, we are still in the early stages of understanding how traffickers use technology in both sex and labor trafficking (Latonero et al. 2012).

Overview of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking has grown to be the third largest criminal enterprise globally ranking behind drug trade and counterfeiting, and it continues to expand at a rapid rate (Greenberg, 2016). In fact, human trafficking is the world’s fastest growing criminal enterprise (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). Even though it is one of the largest criminal underworlds today, there has yet to be a universal definition for human trafficking. Nonetheless, one of the most cited definitions used is the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC); “Human

Trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit” (p. 1).

Despite the various forms of human trafficking (labor trafficking, organ trafficking, debt bondage) and no single profile for trafficking victims, the main focus of law enforcement has long been skewed towards sex trafficking, specifically of women and girls. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 defines sex trafficking as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act” (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021, paras 4). One estimation is that there are approximately 4.5 million victims of sex trafficking worldwide (End Slavery Now, 2020).

The International Labor Organization (2017) found that, “internationally there are between 20 million and 40 million people in modern slavery today” (p. 5). Out of these victims, the UNODC (2020) has found that, globally, 50% of detected victims are adult women and 20% are young girls. They also concluded that 50% of victims were trafficked for sexual exploitation. Specifically, in North America, sexual exploitation is the most commonly detected form of trafficking, with 72% of all trafficking falling into this category, which is among the highest recorded globally.

Although human trafficking is one of the most large-scale criminal enterprises today, it is still under-reported (U.S. Department of State, 2021). Moreover, police often do not classify cases as human trafficking for a number of reasons. Authorities inability to identify trafficking cases and report human trafficking data poses a substantial challenge for law enforcement and social service agencies (National Institute of Justice, 2020). Interviews conducted by the National Institute of Justice (2020) with law enforcement personnel revealed three main

challenges to identification of trafficking offenses by law enforcement, the report asserted that: “lack of training of law enforcement personnel, pushing identification of human trafficking to later stages of the investigation, and confusion on the difference between human trafficking and other forms of exploitation, such as prostitution” (paras. 8).

Human Trafficking Tactics

The cyber techniques human traffickers utilize covers a total of four stages, these include: the recruitment, transportation, and exploitation of victims, and the ensuing management of illicit profits (Aronowitz, 2009). Throughout each of these stages, traffickers use technology to facilitate their operation.

During the recruitment phase, traffickers typically use tactics such as false employment opportunities to lure their victims and trap them. Victims, may be offered precarious job opportunities such as modeling or dancing, yet, upon arrival, they are abused, threatened and sold in the sex industry (End Slavery Now, 2021). Typically, victims are trying to escape poverty and are lured by the idea of providing a better life for their families. Vulnerable people risk everything to try and escape poverty and horrendous living conditions, traffickers take advantage of this by letting them borrow money in advance. Once they arrive, they are trapped and exploited. The job and living conditions are completely different than what was promised. They become vulnerable and dependent on their traffickers. Their belongings, such as documentation, are taken from them and they are required to pay off their debt through work (Antislavery, 2021). There is a plethora of other recruitment methods such as “seduction and romance, lies about educational or travel opportunities, abduction, sale by family, and recruitment through former slaves” (Spruce, 2017, paras 9). A 2019 data report conducted by Polaris found that the top three

identified sex trafficking types were escort services, illicit massage, health, and beauty, and pornography. They also found that the top five recruitment tactics were intimate partner/marriage proposition, familial, job offer/advertisement, posing as a benefactor, and false promises/fraud. Meanwhile, the StrongHearts Native Helpline (2021) states that, “the top five forms of force, fraud, and coercion are induces/exploits substance abuse issues, physical abuse, sexual abuse, intimidation-displays/threatens weapons, and emotional abuse-intimacy related” (paras 4).

In the transportation phase, traffickers most commonly use trains, buses, planes, and ships to transport victims (Blue Campaign, 2021). “The Urban Institute study found that 71% of the survivors were trafficked by flight, and 52% were trafficked by car or van” (Transportation, 2019, p. 7). “Of the survivors in the Polaris study, 47% were trafficked by taxis, 38% by airplanes, 33% by public buses, 19% by subway, 19% by long distance buses, 11% by long distance rail, 9% by ridesharing and 3% by cruise ships” (Anthony, 2018, p. 25).

The U.S. Office on Trafficking Persons (2021) highlights three ways that a trafficker may gain control over a victim during the exploitation phase. They may use any of these ways or a combination of all three. These include:

“(1) Force - when a human trafficker first gets a new victim, physical force is often necessary to force their victim to participate. The physical abuse associated with trafficking may include: close monitoring, confinement, physical restraint or the use of restraints, physical assault and battery, sexual assault and rape, drug induced addiction, and other types of physical harm. (2) Fraud - a trafficker typically uses fraud as a recruitment tool. They can make false promises to lure the vulnerable victim to their car, a secluded public place, or even their home. The ruse may continue for weeks or even

months. Once they gain control of their victim, however, the victim will likely quickly recognize the promises were empty. (3) Coercion - coercion is psychological manipulation that is used to convince someone they want to take part in something they likely do not actually want to do. Coercion does not include physical abuse. Instead, it is a type of psychological abuse. This could include: threatening to harm the victim, threats of physical violence against the victim's family, confiscating the victim's passport or other similar documents, humiliating and shaming the victim for participating in the forced sex acts or other activities, threatening to deport the victim, and threatening to expose their illegal activities to loved ones or the authorities" (The Administration for Children and Families, table 2).

Traffickers utilize traditional methods of financial management (Brenig et al. 2015). This includes opening bank accounts, purchasing transportation such as plane tickets, booking hotel rooms, and using social media to recruit and advertise victims' services. Said bank accounts may be opened under their victims' names, hiding them in plain sight (Slim, 2020). The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (2020) issued an advisory that encapsulates four common methods employed by modern traffickers. First, traffickers use front companies. Front companies are defined as, "businesses that operate as legitimate entities but commingle illicit funds with legitimate funds" (Slim, 2020, paras 3). Criminals utilize front companies to hide their trafficking operations. Second, traffickers use unlawful employment practices. They lie about the nature of the job and may withhold their victim's salary. Third, traffickers use funnel accounts. Funnel accounts are "bank accounts that are established so a criminal can deposit funds at one geographic location while the criminal's co-conspirator can

immediately make cash and ATM withdrawals at a branch location in another geographic area” (Slim, 2020, paras 5). This allows them to move funds quickly without leaving a trail. Lastly, traffickers use alternative payment methods and peer-to-peer payment systems. These include credit cards, prepaid cards, mobile payment applications, Zelle, PayPal, and Venmo.

Certain patterns have emerged in cases where sex traffickers use the Internet: (1) Advertisements of victims are placed on online classified sites (2) social networking sites are used to recruit victims, (3) investigations may begin with a picture of potential victims in online classified ads, and (4) a majority of victims have been identified as runaways (Laterno, 2011). That being said, the internet is a breeding tool for exploitation of women and girls which will be analyzed in the next section.

Human Trafficking in the Cyberspace

The relationship between human trafficking and technology has become an increasing concern for the public and private sector with the increased expansion of the Internet. The Pew Research Center (2021) has found that today, around 93% of adults use the internet, with 15% being smartphone only internet users. Shared Hope International (2012) claims that technology has become the most significant facilitator of commercial sex trade. The Internet specifically has aided in the expansion of child sex trafficking because it can connect clandestine customers with trafficking victims while at the same time distancing the perpetrator from the crime (Finklea et al., 2015). Latonero (2011) has found that currently statistics suggest that just one child can generate over \$1,000 a night. Knowing this, traffickers use social media apps and chat rooms to groom children; oftentimes this will allow traffickers to mask themselves as children in

cyberspace to gain the trust and cooperation of potential victims. (Jennifer E. et. al, 2020). Call of Duty, the world's best-selling video game franchise, has been used by perpetrators to recruit children. Using private chat rooms, traffickers disguise themselves as friends and begin the grooming process (Stopptrafficking, 2018).

Smartphones have also enabled perpetrators to reach a larger client-base because they can schedule more sexual encounters per child (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). They also use cellphones to track their victims' movements and control their actions. Cellphones allow geotracking, which is "the ability to identify a person's current, physical location by obtaining GPS data from their smartphone devices" (PCMAG, 2021, paras 1). Also, applications such as MySpy allow traffickers to monitor their victims' phones (Johnson, 2017).

Financial systems are used by traffickers to conceal their source of income. "Traffickers can exchange money through online currency transfer services when commercially exploiting their victims, thereby obscuring their illicit activities. Encryption technologies (dark web and cryptocurrency) allow individuals engaged in illicit activities, including traffickers, to be paid in ways that are difficult to trace, reducing the risk of perpetrators being located by law enforcement" (Lukianchuk, Grebeniuk, & Cherniak, 2017, p. 71). Another common form is the use of a legitimate business, such as massage parlors, to mask their true identity. Victims are forced to work as masseuses, as well as provide extra services to their clandestine customers. Through the trafficking technology nexus, traffickers are able to commit their crimes hidden in plain sight.

There is a limited amount of reliable data related to human trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2021). The U.S. Department of State (2021) released a committee guide that stated, "All

public awareness and outreach efforts should remain consistent with research and cite accurate sources. When using data or statistics, the quality and quantity of human trafficking data available are often hampered by the hidden nature of the crime, challenges in identifying individual victims, gaps in data accuracy and completeness, and significant barriers regarding the sharing of victim information among various stakeholders. For these reasons, data and statistics may not reflect the full nature or scope of the problem” (paras. 4). Without an appropriate identification system and accurate reports on victims, conducting research on human trafficking is an arduous task.

CURRENT STUDY

The primary objective of the present study was to examine how technology has facilitated human trafficking through the use of the internet, smartphones, and financial systems. As previously noted, technology is used by traffickers to recruit victims, to facilitate their trafficking operations, and to control victims by restricting their social media and phone access. They also impersonate the victim, and/or spread lies and rumors about them online (Polaris, 2020). Thus, I designed this study to investigate how technology has bolstered human trafficking into the third largest clandestine crime in the world. I addressed this with the following research question: How has technology transformed human trafficking over time? I hypothesize that the rise of human trafficking is subsequently due to the evolution of technology over time and will continue to expand traffickers' market. Currently, research suggests that if we understand how technology is used by traffickers, it can help prevent future victimization and inform targeted interventions. Newspaper articles inform the general public on trending topics such as human trafficking. My study may reveal that by educating the media on the way's traffickers use technology, we can prevent future victimization. Correspondingly, by training law enforcement officers on the signs of human trafficking, they will be able to differentiate between human trafficking cases and other cases such as prostitution.

METHODS

The present study examines newspaper articles from the 1980s to the present from major news outlets, to explore the relationship between technological advancements and the rise of human trafficking. News articles were chosen from the five major daily newspapers in the United States, which include the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. These newspapers were selected because they have the top circulation in the United States and cover a variety of topics, including human and sex trafficking. Articles were selected and included in the content analyses based on key terminology. In other words, articles were screened for the following terms: internet, smartphone/cellphone, financial systems, apps, social media, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, video games, women, girls, human trafficking, and sex trafficking.

The current data showed over 800 news articles which included the key terms per decade. News articles were defined as articles that discuss current or recent news pertaining to human trafficking. Articles were refined based on their usage of human trafficking, sex trafficking, the internet and technology per decade. Five of the top fifty articles per decade were then selected using a number randomizer. In total, 25 articles were coded for key terms.

Content Analysis

“A content analysis is used for measuring, classifying, and evaluating the content of any type of human communication, and is founded on the belief that communication affects and is affected by our social environment” (Krippendorff, 1989, p. 403). Essentially, it is a research tool used to determine whether or not certain words, themes, or concepts are present within some given qualitative data (Colombia, 2019). In the current study, keywords were coded based on

whether or not they were present in the randomly selected article. Keywords included: technology, Internet, human trafficking and sex trafficking. Each article was coded in terms of the presence (1 = yes) or absence (0 = no) of these keywords. All newspaper articles were distinguished by their timeframe, as well as whether they included technology or not. They were then analyzed for the prevalence of each sub-theme per decade, such as offender/victim demographic, location, and crime committed.

RESULTS

The results showed that over time, more articles with the terms trafficking and technology were obvious (see Figure 1). During the 1980s, a total of 948 articles were identified. This rose dramatically in the 1990s with a total of 13,844 articles. It continued to rise in the 2000s with a total of 89,186 articles. Last, the number peaked with a total of 194,854 articles during the 2010s. Currently, 33,209 articles were found in this decade however, I hypothesize that will rise by 2029.

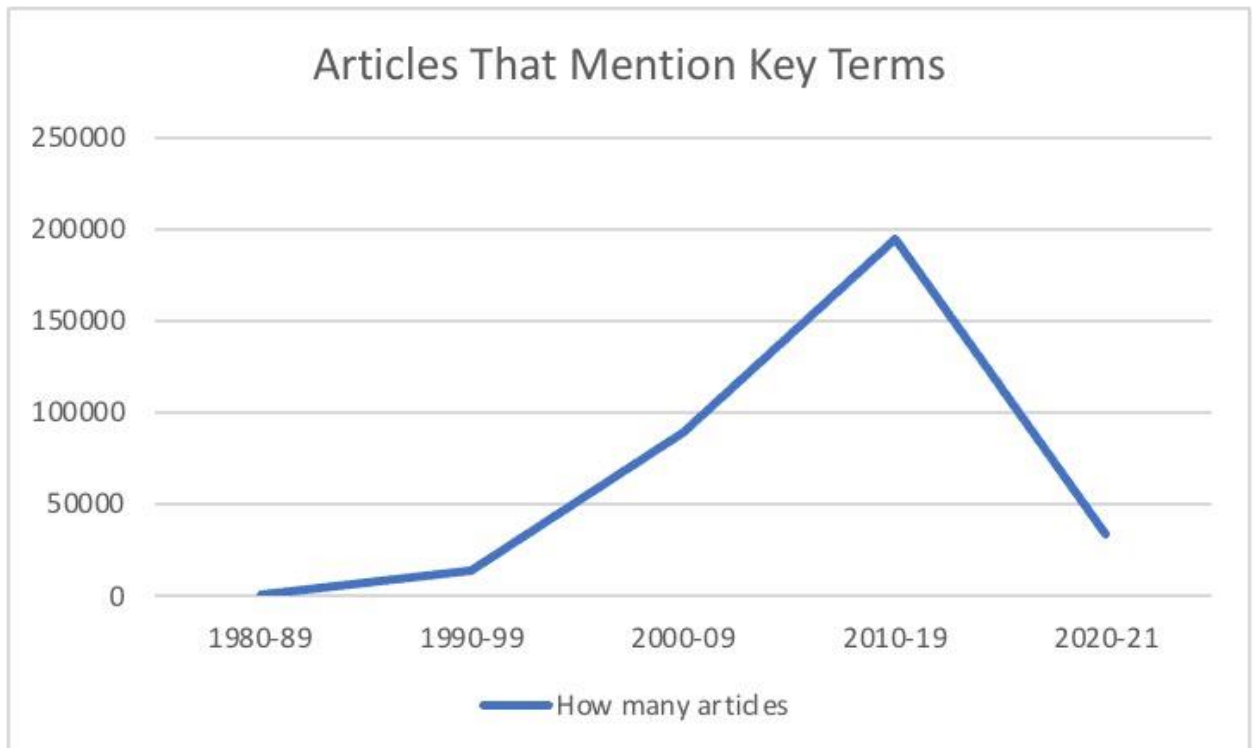


Figure 1. Newspaper Articles Involving Trafficking and Technology Over Time

A second analysis was conducted using newspaper dailies to determine how technology is used by perpetrators. In the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, technology was not mentioned in trafficking articles. Technology was however mentioned in 20% of the articles examined during

the 2010 and 2020 decades. Furthermore, the Internet was not mentioned in 2000 nor in 2020. The Internet was mentioned in 20% of the articles in the following decades: 1980s, 1990s, and 2010s. In the articles that did mention technology, advertisements accounted for 16% of the methods used by perpetrators. Meanwhile, mail-order wives, websites, and GPS devices each accounted for 4%.

In the articles that mentioned technology and the internet, patterns emerged between how technology and the internet was used, as well as the location and demographic of offenders and victims. The internet and technology were mainly used in form of sex ads and websites. These included pages such as Craigslist, Backpage, Reddit, Cityvibe, Erotic Review, Bedpage, Skype, and Switter. Meanwhile, technology used to promote sex trafficking included Memex and Tellfinder uncharted software. Asia and North America were the main two locations mentioned, with individuals from Thailand and the United States consistently represented as perpetrators of sex trafficking. The offenders were all middle-aged males and of either Asian, American, or European descent. In contrast, victims were all females of primarily Asian descent and around 13 to 17 years of age.

The current study found no observable patterns between the offense with which perpetrators were charged with. Charges included prostitution, child pornography, and sex trafficking. Although child pornography includes technology, there is no relationship between pornography and sex trafficking.

DISCUSSION

As highlighted in the introduction, traffickers have leveraged misused technology to exploit their victims. While a plethora of empirical research discusses the growth of human trafficking, very few discuss the role technology has in its expansion. The purpose of this study was to determine how technology has bolstered sex trafficking into the third largest clandestine crime in the world. Using the five major daily newspaper articles, I addressed a major knowledge gap between the media and law enforcement. The results show that technology has been detrimental in the rise of trafficking; however, the field remains largely unaware to what extent. The articles analyzed mention forms in which the internet is used; however, they do not go into depth on how imperative cyberspace is to traffickers in their trade.

When I began this thesis, I predicted that technology and the internet would be used more frequently as time progressed. Consistent with my prediction, technology was more prevalent in later decades however, not by much. The internet had the opposite effect, it appeared in earlier articles more frequently than in later ones. Thus, the current findings did not support my hypothesis. Overall, this study demonstrated how the public is likely still in the early stages of understanding how traffickers hide in plain sight. Scarce research exists into the implications that technology has had in facilitating trafficking globally, as reflected in the articles' lack of mentioning technology as an enabler of human trafficking.

In my analysis, certain patterns emerged on how traffickers use cyberspace to exploit their victims. I found that the most common form of exploitation was the use of sex ads on websites such as Craigslist. This is reflected in current literature, as the majority of traffickers use the Internet for their trafficking operations (UNODC, 2020). I also found that all of the

victims were females between 13 and 17 years of age and all of the offenders were middle aged men. This is consistent with previous literature findings that the large majority of sex trafficking victims are female and the majority of offenders are male (UNODC, 2020).

Also, a disparity in criminal charges and offenses exists. I found no relationship between the offense traffickers were charged with and the offense committed. Traffickers were charged with various crimes including child pornography, rather than with human trafficking. This discrepancy results in confusion for both the media and law enforcement on what human trafficking is and how vast it has become. This is reflected in media articles lack of awareness of how technology is used in the human trafficking world. Stories that may reiterate the use of technology may be lost to other crimes such as child prostitution. In conclusion, the media and law enforcement are slowly becoming aware of the effect's technology has had on trafficking today. In the future, investigating further into how the lack of human trafficking charges leads to less exposure of the effects of technology in media articles would be useful.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study has numerous limitations that future researchers may address. The sample only included articles written by investigative journalists. Future research may expand their resources to gain a clearer image. Two options are using police reports and interviewing police officers. Police reports may provide more details about how human traffickers used technology in their operation. Unfortunately, police reports have several limitations as well. Police reports are oftentimes not released, difficult to obtain, do not provide a complete data set, are not comparable, and may be biased (Güss, 2020). In addition, future researchers may also conduct interviews with law enforcement agents. Police officers are at the forefront of dealing

with crimes, thus they may provide information not found on police reports nor articles. Federal government agents may also be ideal candidates however, they may be more challenging to get in contact with.

Human trafficking has become a large concern and interest within the criminal justice field, as newspaper articles about it have risen over the decade. Due to the limitations in this current study, no clear patterns found between the rise of technology, the internet and human trafficking. Considering the continual growth of human trafficking, it is imperative for law enforcement and media to become aware of technology as a facilitator of this crime. Future researchers should explore the potential effectiveness of charging offenders with cybercrime related charges in raising awareness of the usage of technology in trafficking. They should also focus on ways to use technology to combat human trafficking. Further research should explore interviewing police officers involved in posing as future victims, as well as survivors of human trafficking. Future researchers may use the United Abolitionist group as a source, as they are an agency in the U.S. that connects organizations and resources to educate, prevent, rescue and rehabilitate against modern-day slavery and exploitation (United Abolitionist, 2021). Overall, this study shows that human trafficking is an ever growing, undetected crime that will continue to prosper without a concerted effort to explore the cyberspace as a dangerous tool for its promulgation.

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