



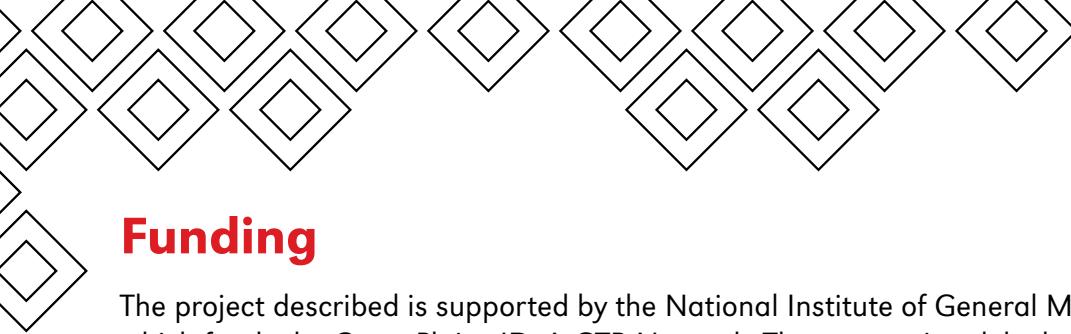
SCHOOL OF CRIMINOLOGY
AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

OPD-UNO Collaboration for the Prevention and Intervention of Human Trafficking against Children in Omaha



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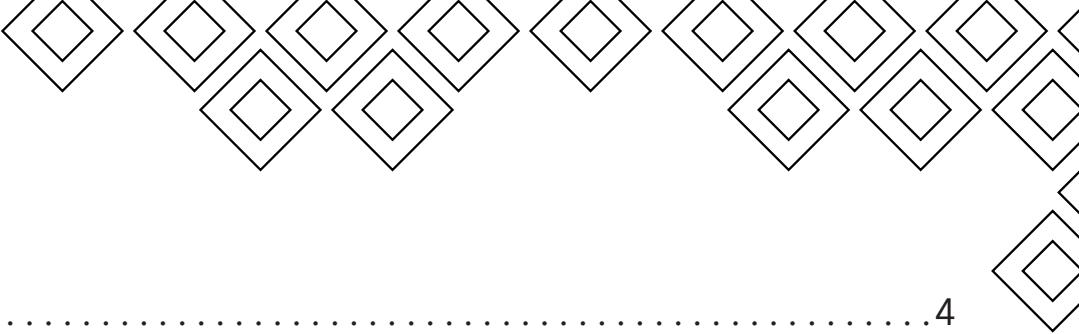
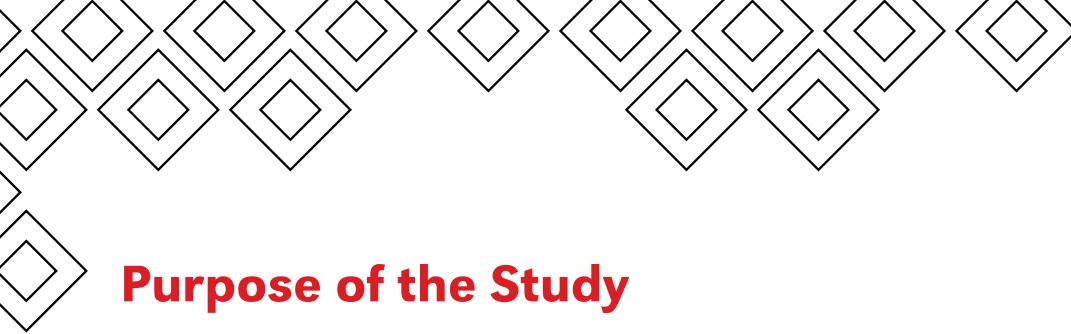


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Purpose of the Study

- Prior research on sex trafficking of children has identified common risk factors or indicators of sex trafficking victimization including repeatedly “going missing”/running away, sexual abuse history, child abuse history, out of home care, and substance abuse (e.g., Dank et al., 2017; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Macy et al., 2021; NCMEC, 2023; Reid et al., 2017, 2018).
- Missing/runaway children are believed to be especially vulnerable to exploitation because of a lack of guardianship and protection from would-be offenders (e.g., Dank et al., 2017; Hershberger et al., 2018).
- There is limited information on what distinguishes missing/runaway children who are victims of sex trafficking from missing/ runaway children who are not (cf. de Vries et al., 2020). That is, given that all missing/runaway children are at high-risk for sex trafficking, why are some missing/runaway children exploited, while others are not?
- The goal of the current study is to identify what attributes, characteristics, or experiences distinguish sex trafficking victims from an already high-risk population of missing/runaway children.
- Results are anticipated to inform future investigation and intervention efforts for at-risk children and to aid prevention and early intervention of child sex trafficking.

Research Questions

1. Among a high-risk sample of missing/run away children, which factors distinguish children with **concerns** for sex trafficking from children with no concerns for sex trafficking (i.e., non-victims)?
2. Among a high-risk sample of missing/run away children, which factors distinguish children who are **confirmed** sex trafficking victims from children with no concerns for sex trafficking (i.e., non-victims)?

Data and Methods

A sample of 521 at-risk girls were identified by the OPD Child Special Victims Unit (CSVU). Children in the current sample had runaway or gone missing between 2019 and 2021. The sample was limited to girls due to higher prevalence and risk for sex trafficking among girls compared to boys (Reid et al., 2017). Children were identified for the sample if they had two or more of five primary risk indicators for sex trafficking: (1) a history of sexual abuse, (2) a history of child abuse, (3) out of home placement (i.e., foster care), (4) a history of substance abuse, or (5) three or more missing reports. Because a history of missingness is one of the strongest risk factors associated with sex trafficking (NCMEC, 2023), all children with this last risk factor (three or more missing reports) were included in the sample. One girl was removed from the sample prior to analysis due to missing information on several of the variables of interest, resulting in a final sample of 520 at-risk girls.

Outcome Variable

The dependent variable or outcome of interest was measured as a categorical variable with three categories: (0) there were no concerns that the child was being sex trafficked in any official records (i.e., *non-sex trafficking victim*), (1) there were some concerns that the child was being sex trafficked, but they are not a confirmed victim (e.g., child abuse/neglect reports with parents or other reporters indicating concern or investigator or other professional indicating concerns, but no formal police investigation has confirmed they are a sex trafficking victim) (i.e., *sex trafficking concerns*), and (2) the child was a confirmed sex trafficking victim through police investigation (i.e., *confirmed sex trafficking victim*).

Risk Factors

Variables, or factors, collected for this study were grouped into four categories: (1) child's behavioral risk factors, (2) history of childhood maltreatment, (3) victimization and other history, and (4) demographic characteristics. Each of these is described in greater detail below.

Behavioral risk factors were collected through OPD missing report narratives and/or official police records for substance abuse history. Behavioral risk factors included whether the child had *three or more missing reports* (0 = no, 1 = yes), the *number of missing reports* (count; range: 0-65 missing reports), the average length of missing incidents (measured in days; range: 0-290.81 days), whether they were ever *found in a hotel/motel* during a missing incident (0 = no, 1 = yes), and whether they were affiliated with a *gang* (0 = no, 1 = yes). Substance use was divided on whether they used *alcohol* (0 = no, 1 = yes), *marijuana* (0 = no, 1 = yes), or *other substances* (e.g., cocaine, meth, ecstasy, opioids; 0 = no, 1 = yes).

Childhood maltreatment variables were collected through the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) child abuse and neglect (CAN) reports. Factors collected included the *number of CAN referrals* to DHHS (count; range: 0-77 referrals), whether the child had ever been placed in *out of home care* (e.g., placed into foster care or residential treatment) (0 = no, 1 = yes), and the types of maltreatment experienced. Types of maltreatment included *physical abuse* (0 = no, 1 = yes), *neglect* (0 = no, 1 = yes), *emotional abuse* (0 = no, 1 = yes), and *witnessing domestic violence* (DV; 0 = no, 1 = yes).

Victimization and other history variables were primarily collected through CAN or missing report narratives, as well as official police reports for sexual assault or other victimizations. These variables included whether the child was a victim of *sexual abuse or assault* (0 = no, 1 = yes), was a victim of *intimate partner abuse* (0 = no, 1 = yes), was a victim of any other *interpersonal crime* (e.g., assault, terroristic threats, protection order violation, harassment; 0 = no, 1 = yes), has experienced *housing instability* other than foster care (0 = no, 1 = yes), has a *mental health diagnosis* (e.g., depression, anxiety, mood disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder; 0 = no, 1 = yes), or has a history of *suicidal ideation or attempts* (0 = no, 1 = yes).

Finally, demographic variables were collected from police records and CAN or missing report narratives. Demographics included *race* (0 = White, 1 = Black, 2 = Hispanic, 3 = American Indian, 4 = other or multiple races) and whether the child identified as *lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning* (LGBTQ+; 0 = no, 1 = yes).

Analysis

First, we reviewed descriptive statistics (i.e., frequency, means, ranges) for all study variables. These descriptives are provided for the full sample, as well as subsamples of (i) confirmed sex trafficking victims, (ii) children with concerns for sex trafficking, and (iii) non-sex trafficking victims. Second, to assess which factors significantly predict membership in the concerns for sex trafficking group compared to the non-sex trafficking victim group, as well as membership in the confirmed sex trafficking group compared to the non-sex trafficking victim group, we conducted a multinomial logistic regression.

Multinomial logistic regression is appropriate for a categorical outcome such as the present study's sex trafficking measure (i.e., 0 = non-sex trafficking victims, 1 = sex trafficking concerns, but not confirmed victims, 2 = confirmed sex trafficking victims). This analysis assesses how each variable is associated with membership in the sex trafficking victim groups compared to the non-sex trafficking victim group, while holding the other variables in the model constant. The Odds Ratio (OR) and 95% Confidence Interval (CI) were examined to determine which relationships were significant in each model. The **OR** value depicts the effect size for the variable —values greater than “1” indicate a positive relationship, whereas values less than “1” indicate a negative relationship. The **95% CI** for each variable indicates the range of values in which the “true” value of the OR likely falls. A smaller range of CIs indicates more precision and confidence in the estimate of the OR, whereas a larger range indicates more variability in the estimate (see McLeod, 2023, or Upton, 2017, for more information on multinomial logistic regression).

Findings

Descriptives

Descriptive statistics for all study variables are presented in Table 1. The majority (75.77%) of the sample were non-sex trafficking victims (hereafter called non-victims), 23.65% of the sample had *concerns for sex trafficking*, and 9.04% of the sample were identified as *confirmed sex trafficking victims* through formal police investigation. A brief comparison across subsamples is reviewed below.

Table 1. Sample and Variable Descriptive Statistics

	Range	Confirmed ST ^a (n = 47) %/Mean (SD)	ST Concerns (n = 79) %/Mean (SD)	Non-ST Victim (n = 394) %/Mean (SD)	Full Sample (N = 520) %/Mean (SD)
<i>Dependent Variable</i>	0 - 2				
Non-ST Victim		—	—	—	75.77%
Concerns of ST		—	—	—	23.65%
Confirmed ST Victim ^a		—	—	—	9.04%
<i>Behavioral Risk Factors</i>					
Three+ Missing Reports	0 - 1	95.74%	93.67%	92.89%	93.27%
Number of Missing Reports	0 - 65	14.09 (11.07)	10.68 (9.03)	7.99 (8.01)	8.95 (8.67)
Average Length of Runs/Missing	0 - 290.81	15.72 (24.82)	14.41 (19.67)	14.93 (29.31)	14.92 (27.63)
Found in Hotel During Missing	0 - 1	44.68%	20.25%	8.12%	13.27%
Gang Affiliation	0 - 1	25.53%	11.39%	7.11%	9.42%
Alcohol Use	0 - 1	63.83%	50.63%	30.71%	36.73%
Marijuana Use	0 - 1	82.98%	69.62%	46.70%	53.46%
Other Substance Abuse ^b	0 - 1	44.68%	15.19%	10.15%	14.04%
<i>Childhood Maltreatment</i>					
Number of CAN Referrals	0 - 77	26.51 (17.52)	20.61 (14.44)	12.97 (11.72)	15.36 (13.50)
Physical Abuse	0 - 1	76.60%	86.08%	70.56%	73.46%
Neglect	0 - 1	93.62%	98.73%	87.06%	89.42%
Emotional Abuse	0 - 1	21.28%	31.65%	28.93%	28.65%
Witnessing DV	0 - 1	29.79%	44.30%	42.39%	41.54%
Out of Home Care History	0 - 1	91.49%	72.15%	55.08%	60.96%
<i>Victimization/Other History</i>					
Sexual Abuse/Assault	0 - 1	91.49%	83.54%	62.94%	68.65%
Intimate Partner Abuse	0 - 1	25.53%	15.19%	12.44%	14.04%
Other Personal Victimization	0 - 1	42.55%	43.04%	38.32%	39.42%
Housing Instability History	0 - 1	21.28%	16.46%	17.01%	17.31%
Mental Health Diagnosis	0 - 1	61.70%	50.63%	33.50%	38.65%
Suicidal Ideation/Attempts	0 - 1	55.32%	51.90%	41.88%	44.62%
<i>Demographics</i>					
Race/Ethnicity	0 - 4				
Black		42.55%	41.77%	46.70%	45.58%
White		25.53%	30.38%	21.83%	23.46%
Hispanic		17.02%	22.78%	21.57%	21.35%
American Indian		8.51%	3.80%	7.61%	7.12%
Other Race/Ethnicity		6.38%	1.27%	2.28%	2.50%
LGBTQ+	0 - 1	6.38%	2.53%	6.09%	5.58%

Note: ST = Sex Trafficking; CAN = Child Abuse/Neglect; DV = Domestic Violence; LGBTQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer.

^a Sex trafficking victims confirmed by police investigations.

^b Examples of other substances include cocaine, meth, ecstasy, etc.

As outlined in Table 1, there were notable patterns in the **behavioral risk factors** across groups. There were similar percentages of children with *three or more missing reports* for each sample (range: 92.89%-95.74%). However, when examining specific *numbers of missing reports*, the confirmed sex trafficking group had more reports, on average ($\bar{x} = 14.09$), compared to the concerns group ($\bar{x} = 10.68$) and non-victims ($\bar{x} = 7.99$). Similarly, the confirmed sex trafficking group had a slightly longer *average length of runs/missingness* ($\bar{x} = 15.72$) compared to the concerns group ($\bar{x} = 14.41$) and non-victims ($\bar{x} = 14.93$). Across the remaining variables, a larger percentage of confirmed sex trafficking victims were *found in a hotel during missingness* (44.68%), *affiliated with a gang* (25.53%), using *alcohol* (63.83%), using *marijuana* (82.98%), and using *other substances* (44.68%).

Variation of **childhood maltreatment history** across the three subgroups was less consistent with expectations, likely due to the at-risk nature of the sample and the extensive abuse experienced by most children (see Table 1). Confirmed sex trafficking victims had a greater average number of *CAN referrals* ($\bar{x} = 26.51$) compared to children with sex trafficking concerns ($\bar{x} = 20.61$) and non-victims ($\bar{x} = 12.97$). For the individual types of maltreatment, most of the sample experienced *physical abuse and neglect*, regardless of sex trafficking group (*physical abuse* range: 70.56%-86.08%; *neglect* range: 87.06%-98.73%). Fewer confirmed sex trafficking victims had experienced *emotional abuse* (21.28%) or *witnessed DV* (29.79%) than non-victims (*emotional abuse* = 28.93%; *witnessing DV* = 42.39%), while the sex trafficking concerns group had a larger percentage for both types of maltreatment than either confirmed or non-victims (*emotional abuse* = 31.65%; *witnessing DV* = 44.30%). Consistent with expectations, a much larger percentage of confirmed sex trafficking victims (91.49%) had a history of *out of home care* compared to the sex trafficking concerns group (72.15%) and the non-victim group (55.08%)

For **prior victimization and other history** factors, a majority of each of the subsamples experienced *sexual abuse/assault* (range: 62.97% for non-victims to 91.49% of confirmed sex trafficking victims) (see Table 1). Across the remaining factors, a larger percentage of confirmed sex trafficking victims experienced *intimate partner abuse* (25.53%) or *other personal victimization* (42.55%), experienced *housing instability* (21.28%), had a *mental health diagnosis* (61.70%), and had a history of *suicidal ideation or attempts* (55.32%) than children with sex trafficking concerns or non-victims.

Finally, the **demographics** across the groups were similar (see Table 1). For each group the largest percentage of children identified as *Black* (range: 41.77%-46.70%), followed by *White* (range: 21.83%-30.38%), *Hispanic* (range: 17.02%-22.78%), *American Indian/Alaska Native* (range: 3.80%-8.51%), or *another race or ethnicity* (mostly multiple races; range: 1.27%-6.38%). The confirmed sex trafficking victims and non-victims had similar percentages of children identifying as *LGBTQ+* (6.38% and 6.09%, respectively); 2.53% of the sex trafficking concerns group identified as *LGBTQ+*.

Although not reported in Table 1, we also explored children's *cumulative risk* or how many of the five primary risk factors a child had experienced. That is, children who had (1) a history of sexual abuse, (2) a history of child abuse, (3) out of home placement (i.e., foster care), (4) a history of substance abuse, and/or (5) three or more missing reports. Due to the high-risk nature of the sampling, the full sample had, on average, over two-thirds of the five risk factors ($\bar{x} = 3.80$). However, as expected, comparing the three subsamples shows that children in the confirmed sex trafficking group had nearly all five risk factors on average ($\bar{x} = 4.68$), whereas children in the sex trafficking concerns group ($\bar{x} = 4.25$) and the non-victim group ($\bar{x} = 3.61$) had fewer risk factors, on average. Taken together, we see a clear increase in cumulative risk for the confirmed sex trafficking group compared to the non-victim group.

Multinomial Logistic Regression

Results from the multinomial logistic regression model are presented in Table 2 below; significant variable coefficients are bolded. The findings first discuss the (i) sex trafficking concerns group compared to non-victims and then the (ii) confirmed sex trafficking group compared to non-victims.

Sex Trafficking Concerns

To begin, looking at **behavioral risk factors**, children with sex trafficking concerns were significantly more likely to have been *found in a hotel/motel while missing* compared to non-victims (Odds Ratio [OR] = 2.50; 95% Confidence Interval [CI] [1.21, 5.18]). Specifically, children who were found in a hotel/motel while missing had 2.50 times greater odds of having sex trafficking concerns. No other behavioral risk factors were significant predictors of sex trafficking concerns compared to non-victims.

For **childhood maltreatment** factors, children with sex trafficking concerns had significantly more *CAN referrals* than non-victims (OR = 1.04; 95% CI [1.01, 1.06]). For each additional *CAN referral*, a child had 1.04 times greater odds of having sex trafficking concerns. No other childhood maltreatment factors were significant predictors of sex trafficking concerns compared to non-victims.

No **victimization or other history** factors were significant for distinguishing the sex trafficking concerns group from non-victims.

Finally, for **demographics**, children with sex trafficking concerns were less likely to be *American Indian/Alaska Native* (OR = 0.25; 95% CI [0.06, 0.97]) compared to non-victims. That is, compared to White children, *American Indian/Alaska Native* children had 0.25 times lower odds of having sex trafficking concerns. No other demographic variables were significantly related to having sex trafficking concerns compared to non-victims.

Confirmed Sex Trafficking Victims

Three **behavioral risk factors** were significant predictors of being a confirmed victim of sex trafficking compared to being in the non-victim group. Confirmed victims of sex trafficking had significantly more *missing reports* (OR = 1.05; 95% CI [1.01, 1.09]), were more likely to be *found in a hotel/motel while missing* (OR = 5.38; 95% CI [2.22, 13.04]), and were more likely to use *other substances* (OR = 2.90; 95% CI [1.15, 7.35]) than non-victims. More specifically, for each additional *missing report*, a child had 1.05 times greater odds of being confirmed as a sex trafficking victim. Children who were *found in a hotel/motel while missing* had 5.38 times greater odds of being a confirmed sex trafficking victim, and children who used *other substances* had 2.90 times greater odds of being a confirmed sex trafficking victim. No other behavioral risk factors were significant predictors for confirmed sex trafficking victims compared to non-victims.

Table 2. Multinomial Regression Predicting Sex Trafficking Concerns or Confirmed Victim (N = 520)

	<i>Sex Trafficking Concerns</i>			<i>Confirmed Sex Trafficking Victim^a</i>		
	<i>b</i> (SE)	OR	95% CI	<i>b</i> (SE)	OR	95% CI
<i>Behavioral Risk Factors</i>						
Three+ Missing Reports	-0.25 (0.56)	0.78	[0.26, 2.33]	-0.25 (0.91)	0.78	[0.13, 4.68]
Number of Missing Reports	0.02 (0.02)	1.02	[0.99, 1.05]	0.04 (0.02)*	1.05	[1.01, 1.09]
Average Length of Runs/Missing	0.00 (0.01)	1.00	[0.99, 1.01]	-0.00 (0.01)	1.00	[0.98, 1.01]
Found in Hotel During Missing	0.92 (0.37)*	2.50	[1.21, 5.18]	1.68 (0.45)***	5.38	[2.22, 13.04]
Gang Affiliation	0.24 (0.46)	1.27	[0.52, 3.10]	0.96 (0.54)	2.62	[0.92, 7.50]
Alcohol Use	0.58 (0.31)	1.79	[0.97, 3.30]	0.74 (0.44)	2.09	[0.87, 4.98]
Marijuana Use	0.51 (0.31)	1.66	[0.90, 3.05]	0.97 (0.50)	2.64	[0.98, 7.06]
Other Substances Abuse ^b	-0.21 (0.41)	0.81	[0.36, 1.82]	1.07 (0.47)*	2.90	[1.15, 7.35]
<i>Childhood Maltreatment</i>						
Number of CAN Reports	0.04 (0.01)**	1.04	[1.01, 1.06]	0.05 (0.02)**	1.06	[1.02, 1.09]
Physical Abuse	0.41 (0.41)	1.50	[0.68, 3.34]	-0.76 (0.53)	0.47	[0.16, 1.33]
Neglect	1.86 (1.06)	6.42	[0.80, 51.46]	-1.06 (0.83)	0.35	[0.07, 1.76]
Emotional Abuse	-0.52 (0.32)	0.60	[0.32, 1.12]	-1.32 (0.52)**	0.27	[0.10, 0.73]
Witness Domestic Violence	-0.27 (0.28)	0.76	[0.44, 1.32]	-0.84 (0.44)	0.43	[0.18, 1.01]
Out of Home Care History	0.04 (0.33)	1.04	[0.55, 1.97]	1.68 (0.66)*	5.37	[1.47, 19.71]
<i>Victimization/Other History</i>						
Sexual Abuse/Assault	0.66 (0.36)	1.93	[0.95, 3.93]	1.04 (0.63)	2.82	[0.82, 9.63]
Intimate Partner Abuse	-0.10 (0.39)	0.91	[0.42, 1.94]	0.31 (0.50)	1.37	[0.52, 3.61]
Other Personal Victimization	0.06 (0.28)	1.06	[0.62, 1.83]	0.23 (0.41)	1.26	[0.57, 2.81]
Housing Instability History	-0.63 (0.37)	0.53	[0.26, 1.10]	-0.12 (0.51)	0.89	[0.33, 2.40]
Mental Health Diagnosis	0.10 (0.30)	1.10	[0.61, 1.98]	0.18 (0.44)	1.20	[0.51, 2.82]
Suicide Ideation/Attempts	-0.08 (0.29)	0.92	[0.52, 1.63]	-0.01 (0.43)	0.99	[0.42, 2.32]
<i>Demographics</i>						
Race/Ethnicity						
Black	-0.21 (0.36)	0.81	[0.40, 1.62]	0.35 (0.52)	1.41	[0.51, 3.91]
Hispanic	-0.07 (0.40)	0.94	[0.43, 2.06]	0.05 (0.64)	1.05	[0.30, 3.67]
American Indian	-1.38 (0.69)*	0.25	[0.06, 0.97]	-0.62 (0.78)	0.54	[0.12, 2.49]
Other Race	-1.22 (1.15)	0.30	[0.03, 2.83]	1.30 (0.98)	3.66	[0.54, 24.88]
LGBTQ+	-1.18 (0.80)	0.31	[0.06, 1.48]	-0.17 (0.82)	0.85	[0.17, 4.25]
Intercept	-4.82 (1.20)			-5.46 (1.27)		
Model χ^2	181.15***					
McFadden's Adj. R ²	0.10					
Nagelkerke R ²	0.39					

Notes: The reference category for the dependent variable is “non-sex trafficking victim.” For the independent variables, the omitted reference categories are “White” and absence of the respective risk factor. b = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; OR = Odds Ratio; CI = Confidence Interval; CAN = Child Abuse/Neglect; DV/IPV = Domestic Violence and Intimate Partner Violence; LGBTQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning.

^a Sex trafficking victims confirmed by police investigations.

^b Examples of other substances include cocaine, meth, ecstasy, oxycontin, acid, molly, opioids, heroin, prescription pills, Xanax, fentanyl.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Significant **childhood maltreatment** variables associated with being a confirmed sex trafficking victim compared to a non-victim were the number of *CAN referrals* (OR = 1.06; 95% CI [1.02, 1.09]), experiencing *emotional abuse* (OR = 0.27; 95% CI [0.10, 0.73]), and *out of home care* (OR = 5.37; 95% CI [1.47, 19.71]). For each additional *CAN referral*, a child had 1.06 times greater odds of being a confirmed sex trafficking victim than a non-victim. In contrast, children who experienced *emotional abuse* had 0.27 times lower odds of being a confirmed sex trafficking victim than a non-victim (see additional comments on this finding below). Finally, children who had a history of *out of home care* had 5.37 times greater odds of being a confirmed sex trafficking victim than a non-victim. No other childhood maltreatment factors were significant for distinguishing confirmed sex trafficking victims from non-victims.

None of the remaining **victimization/other history** or **demographic** variables were significant predictors for confirmed sex trafficking victims compared to the non-victim group.

Discussion

Research on sex trafficking risk among children has identified consistent characteristics and experiences that increase one’s risk for being trafficked for sex (Dank et al., 2017; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Macy et al., 2021; NCMEC, 2023; Reid et al., 2018). While identifying these risk factors has been valuable for informing investigations and identifying at-risk children, there is still need for a clearer understanding of what differentiates missing/runaway children who are trafficked for sex from children who are not. That is, all missing/runaway children are vulnerable to sex trafficking, but not all missing/runaway children are trafficked. Thus, the purpose of this study was to provide additional insights into the risk factors that can distinguish missing/runaway children who are at the greatest risk for exploitation. There are two main takeaways from this review.

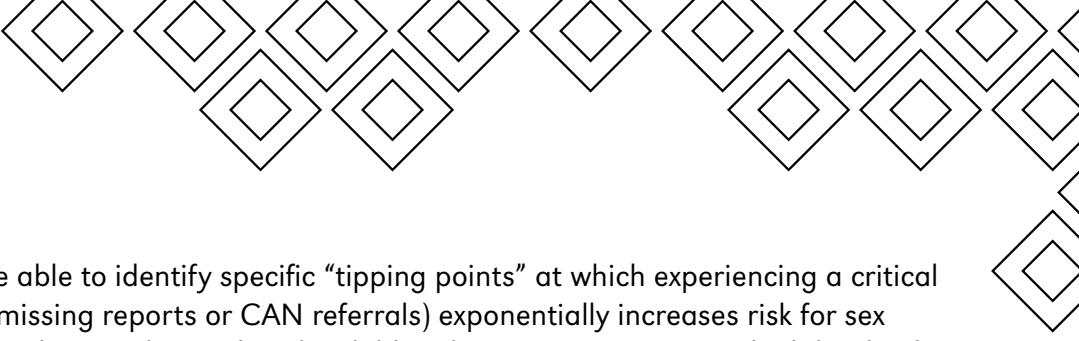
First, confirmed sex trafficking victims had higher incidence rates for nearly all the risk factors examined in this study (see Table 1). Confirmed sex trafficking victims had *more and longer periods of missingness/running away* and had greater rates of being *found in a hotel/motel while missing*, *gang affiliation*, and *substance use*. Further, confirmed sex trafficking victims were more likely to have a greater number of *CAN referrals* and have a history of *sexual abuse*, *intimate partner violence*, *other personal victimization*, and *housing instability*; and had been diagnosed with a *mental health disorder* and/or had a *history of suicidal ideation or attempts* more than children with trafficking concerns and non-victims. These results align with what we know about children most at risk for sex trafficking; they are highly vulnerable and have substantial histories of abuse and/or trauma (Dank et al., 2017; de Vries & Goggin, 2020; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Macy et al., 2021; NCMEC, 2023; Reid et al., 2017, 2018). At the same time, most children in this sample experienced cumulative risk regarding the behavioral risk factors, childhood maltreatment, and victimization experiences examined here. As such, descriptive statistics are useful for studying general incidence of risk factors among these at-risk children, but they cannot tell us which factors matter *most* for distinguishing sex trafficking victims from their high-risk peers who have not been trafficked for sex. The regression analyses inform this critical question.

Second, regression results suggest that finding a missing/run away child *in or near a hotel/motel during a missing incident* is a critical indicator regarding sex trafficking risk. As such children who are found in or near hotels/motels during a missing incident should likely be screened for sex trafficking and prioritized for intervention efforts aimed at preventing or intervening on sex trafficking victimization. These children should also likely be prioritized for emergency medical care and victim services. Similarly, the current findings suggest *having more missing reports, using other substances* (e.g., cocaine, meth), *having more frequent/diverse maltreatment experiences* (i.e., *higher rates of CAN referrals*) and *experiences with out-of-home care* serve as red flags for increased vulnerability for sex trafficking victimization. Notably, both *being found in a hotel/motel during a missing incident* and *having a higher number of CAN referrals* were also important predictors for children with sex trafficking concerns compared to non-victims—highlighting that these factors may be especially useful for early detection. These findings are in line with prior research finding that cumulative trauma or adverse childhood experiences—possibly more so than individual types of maltreatment experiences—are related to sex trafficking victimization for children (de Vries & Goggin, 2020; Kulig, 2022; Reid et al., 2017, 2018). A growing body of research has also suggested that children in out-of-home care, and in particular children living in group homes, may be selectively targeted by traffickers due to their vulnerability (for a discussion see Branscum & Richards, 2023).

At the same time, sexual abuse/assault history, alcohol use, and marijuana use did not significantly distinguish those who were trafficked for sex, or had concerns of sex trafficking, from non-sex trafficking victims. These findings were contrary to prior research (e.g., de Vries & Goggin, 2020; de Vries et al., 2020; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Tyler et al., 2013) and most likely due to the at-risk nature of the sample, as there were high incidence rates of sexual abuse, alcohol use, and marijuana use among all sampled children. Similarly, results regarding the relationship between childhood maltreatment factors and sex trafficking concerns or confirmed sex trafficking victimization were also mixed. Neither physical abuse nor neglect were significant predictors of sex trafficking concerns or being a confirmed sex trafficking victim, again, most likely due to the high incidence rates across the sample. Further, findings indicated that children who experienced emotional abuse were less likely to be confirmed sex trafficking victims, contrary to prior research (de Vries & Goggin, 2020; Jaeckl & Laughon, 2021; Reid et al., 2017). However, confirmed sex trafficking victims were also significantly more likely to have experienced out-of-home care than non-victims. Children are most often brought into state care due to persistent neglect, physical abuse, and/or sexual abuse, but by virtue of being removed from their homes of origin they may be less likely to have experienced emotional abuse from their parents due to less opportunity for the abuse to have occurred. Thus, the relationship between types of child maltreatment and sex trafficking victimization among high-risk children needs further exploration.

Limitations and Other Considerations

Although this analysis provides important insights into which critical risk factors distinguish missing/runaway children who have been trafficked for sex from those with sex trafficking concerns and non-victims, some limitations and additional considerations should be noted. First, the nature of the sample—children were included in the sample if they had experienced two of five critical risk factors and/or had three or more missing reports—precluded us from examining the true prevalence or impact of these five risk factors on sex trafficking among missing/runaway children more generally. Second, a larger more generalized sample of missing/runaway children would allow us to generate distinct risk profiles for children regarding sex trafficking. For example, we may be able to identify whether children who experience a certain number of risk factors (i.e., cumulative risk) or experience certain risk factors in conjunction with one another are at increased risk for



sex trafficking. In addition, we may be able to identify specific “tipping points” at which experiencing a critical risk factor (e.g., a certain number of missing reports or CAN referrals) exponentially increases risk for sex trafficking—an issue in the current sample considering that the children have, on average, very high levels of missing reports and CAN referrals. More specifically, because these children already have many missing/runaway incidents and CAN referrals, reviewing different levels are less informative since these estimates have to be relatively high (e.g., at least 20 CAN referrals, at least 20 missing/runaway incidents) to predict a higher probability of being a confirmed sex trafficking victim (analyses not presented here). It is likely that the “tipping point” of number of missing/runaway incidents or CAN referrals is much lower before risk is elevated for exploitation. Finally, future research attention should also focus on identifying risk factors for other subsamples of children such as those who are LGBTQ+ or who have a mental or physical disability, as well as boys.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the current study suggest that risk factors related to missingness (i.e., *greater number of missing incidents and being found in a hotel/motel*), more frequent and diverse CAN history (i.e., *greater number of CAN referrals and out-of-home care*), and using *other substances* (e.g., cocaine, meth) are critical risk factors for differentiating at-risk children who are confirmed victims of sex trafficking from non-victims. Being found in a hotel/motel while missing and having a history of out-of-home care were the two strongest predictors of being a confirmed sex trafficking victim. As such, findings suggest that these risk factors are red flags for investigators and child-serving professionals during investigations and services that could serve to identify children who are trafficked for sex and require intervention.

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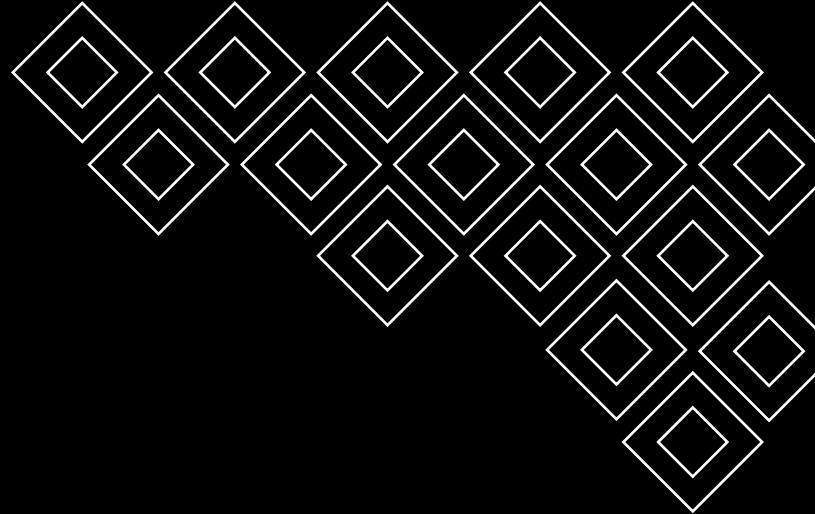
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