ABSTRACT

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Identification of Victims of Trafficking and Their Access to Support Services in Australia

Dr. Nerida Chazal
University of South Australia

Ms Kyla Raby
Australian Red Cross

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Identification of Victims of Trafficking and Their Access to Support Services in Australia

Dr. Nerida Chazal
University of South Australia

Ms Kyla Raby
Australian Red Cross

Research has highlighted the difficulty associated with detecting victims of human trafficking and slavery (Segrave & Milivojević 2010) and explored the numerous barriers that prevent victims from accessing support services (Davy 2017; Larsen & Renshaw 2012). COVID-19 is likely to exacerbate the underlying challenges for victims of slavery in both being identified and accessing support services. The pandemic has produced profound social change, and this has placed significant strain on the criminal justice system, government agencies and non-government organisations all of which play a key role in identifying victims and offering them support. Additionally, a heightened climate of fear, generated from misinformation or lack of information on COVID-19, may further prevent slavery victims from accessing help or receiving adequate support if they are detected. This article will explore these issues by using empirical data and qualitative interviews to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on human trafficking victims in Australia. The article answers two key research questions: how has COVID-19 impacted the identification of victims of human trafficking and slavery in Australia? And, how has COVID-19 impacted victims' access to support services in Australia?

Firstly, the article will measure how the diversion of police resources is impacting the detection of trafficking and slavery victims and limiting the referral of victims to support programs. In Australia, the provision of support services is closely linked to criminal justice procedures, and the Australian Federal Police (AFP) play a key role in referring trafficking victims to support services (Davy 2017). Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the AFP have been an integral part of the national COVID response, and in early April the AFP redeployed 102 staff to COVID-related "Operation PROTECT" (AFP 2020). Similarly, state and territory

police forces have poured considerable resources into policing state borders, enforcing quarantine measures, and undertaking COVID-19 compliance checks (Hunt 2020). To determine how this redirection of resources is influencing the detection of trafficking and slavery victims, we will compare the monthly statistics of referrals by the AFP to the Australian Government funded victims support services for the 6 months between March to July 2020, with the previous 6 month period of October 2019 to February 2020. Based on initial conversations with key stakeholders, it is expected that data will show a notable decline in referrals. Secondly, the article will explore how restrictions on community services and infrastructure will impact the identification and support of victims. Hospitals and medical staff play an important role in identifying victims of trafficking, slavery and slavery like offences (Hachey & Phillippi 2017). Cancellation and limitations of elective surgeries and medical procedures to resource the COVID-19 response may have decreased the opportunities for people in a situation of trafficking or slavery to be identified or actively seek help from medical staff. Additionally, a notable proportion of referrals to the AFP in relation to cases of forced marriage in Australia are made directly from schools (ARC 2019). School closures and a move to online learning may have decreased opportunities for minors to access support from teaching and education staff (in particular school counsellors) and increased their time in the family home, potentially exposing them to higher levels of coercion and pressure to marry (Sundari & Gill 2009).

Finally, the article will examine how financial and resource-based pressure stemming from COVID-19 on the non-government organisations who deliver support services to victims is likely to compromise the provision of victim support. Many grassroots, community organisations that play key roles in both identifying and supporting victims of trafficking and slavery, have had to place limitations on their services. The impacts from the economic fallout will likely continue for many years and therefore the support services available to victims of trafficking and slavery will be long term.

To understand how these issues are playing out in the field, the article includes the findings from semi-structured interviews with staff from organisations supporting victims of trafficking and slavery in Australia. This includes interviews with national government organisations such as the Australian Federal Police, The Department of Home Affairs, the Department of Social Service and the Australian Institute of Criminology. Interviews will also be conducted with key non-government organisations working at the national level to support victims of trafficking. Examples of the organisations working in this space include: the Australian Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Australian Catholic Religious Against

Trafficking in Humans, the Walk Free Foundation, and Anti-Slavery Australia. These governmental and non-governmental organisations have been selected based on their roles in identifying victims and referring them to official support program, as well as their broader role in supporting victims of modern slavery. The interviews will be conducted in November 2020 which will enable participants to comment on trends they have experienced over the past year, giving a good picture of the impact on COVID-19 on victim identification and support. Interview data will be analysed using thematic analysis in NVivo to elicit key themes raised by participants. The interview data will complement the analysis of empirical referral data to offer a fuller picture of the impact of COVID-19 on the identification of victim and provision of victim support in Australia.

Timetable:

August: ethics approval for interviews (The University of South Australia is fast-tracking the ethics process for COVID-19 related research and we are currently working on this submission).

September & October: collate data from sources, undertake literature review on victim identification and the provision of support services.

November: Conduct interviews.

December & January: analyse interview data and data on referral numbers.

February & March: write up article for submission by April.

References:

AFP (2020) 'AFT deploys members to NT to help protect vulnerable communities from COVID-19, AFP Website: https://www.afp.gov.au/news-media/media-releases/afp-deploys-members-nt-help-protect-vulnerable-communities-covid-19 accessed 10th August 2020.

ARC (2019) *Support for Trafficked People Program, Data Snapshot: 2009-2019*, https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/7a957782-a7a1-4b25-97c0-86930dbf0f53/ARC-Support-For-Trafficked-People-Program-Data-Snapshot-2009-to-2019-small.pdf.aspx, accessed 10th August.

Davy, D. (2017) 'Justice for victims of human trafficking in Australia? Issues associated with Australia's criminal justice response to trafficking in persons', *Contemporary Justice Review*, vol. 20(1), pp. 115-131.

Hachey, L & Phillippi, J. (2017) 'Identification and management of Human Trafficking Victims in the Emergency Department', *Advanced Emergency Nursing Journal*, 39(1), pp. 31-51.

Hunt, N. (2020) 'Top detective appointed to manage COVID-10 police operations', *The Advertiser*, 7th August.

Larsen, J.J. & Renshaw, L. (2012) 'People Trafficking in Australia', *Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice,* Australian Institute of Criminology, no. 441, June 2012.

Segrave, M. & Milivojević, S. (2010) 'Auditing the Australian Response to Trafficking', *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* , 22(1), pp. 63-80.

Sundari, A. & Gill, A. (2009) 'Coercion, Consent and the Forced Marriage Debate in the UK', Feminist Legal Studies, 17, pp. 165-154.