



The Urgent Need to Find a “Hidden” Crime

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Yellow crime scene tape.

Bullet holes.

Street corner memorials with bears and pictures.

The scars of crime smack us in our faces and conscience almost every hour of every day.

Instant statistics provide precise numbers of murders, shootings, robberies, assaults and almost every other atrocious felony.

Almost.

Because there is one terrible crime that, just like the sneakiest criminal, somehow stays hidden, year after year, defying detection. It is a crime that imprisons its victims, warping and stealing their souls.

It is child sex trafficking.

They are lured, coerced, sometimes violently abducted by predators who manipulate their vulnerabilities with surgical skill. Like malignant tumors, the trafficking networks grow -silent, unseen, undetected, while society battles crimes that, almost always, are most easily identified and solved.

A click of your mouse tells you how many victims were shot, murdered, raped or robbed.

But child sex trafficking victims? No one knows and, based on the lack of current studies, few seem to care.

We have only vague estimates, blurry statistical snapshots from a handful of rapidly aging studies. One analysis, quoted by experts, puts the number of children at risk between 244,000 and 325,000. Almost as scary as the numbers, the date of that study is 2002 -17 years ago, and it's still being cited in the absence of new research.

Many, but not all, of these victims have histories of already being victims of child sex abuse or being shunted throughout the foster care system, with unstable family situations. Do we care less about these even more vulnerable children in our communities?

If a child disappears, we instantly see "Amber Alerts" with pictures and descriptions of victims and suspects. Are the lives of human trafficking victims who vanish any less precious? Yet, very few, in any organized way, are searching and counting.

Anyone who watched a single CSI show knows how it works. First, investigators answer the call, process the scene, and then use evidence to catch the suspects. But with child sex trafficking, it's more like the Bermuda Triangle. How many children? Who are they? When, where and how were they taken?

Somehow, in the statistically bloated world of law enforcement, it's all a mystery. No agencies, no studies have even begun to put their arms around this terrible crime, to determine just how big it really is.

It's just common sense: if we don't know the extent of the crime network, we won't save most victims or catch most criminals. As a society, we seemingly don't choose to invest the time and money needed to uncover, for the first time, just how massive child sex trafficking really is. Worse yet, many turn a blind eye to the uptick in child predator arrests at major sporting events and the ever-increasing images of child pornography sold for a profit, an even more sinister silent trafficking of children who, in horrific photos, are all too real.

While we doze, that predatory criminal tumor just grows larger. It's grimly ironic that consumers who devour the latest headlines on manhunts for missing and abducted children seem to largely "tune out" pleas for help to quantify the full scope of the child sex trafficking plague.

How big has it grown? How many children's lives are devoured and destroyed each day? No one knows and, quite honestly, far too few appear to care.

Studies in 2015 and 2016 by both Cole & Sprang and Fedina, Williamson, & Perdue did take a stab at why no one can tell us the information we desperately need to know. Summarizing: "Due to a dearth of empirical research...the lack of the use of sound research methods...and the way the crime can be concealed...reliable estimates of sex trafficking of children remain elusive."

Elusive? In our view, they are virtually non-existent. For now, there are no definitive numbers, no sense of the boundaries of this atrocity, or, most critically, how fast it is expanding.

There are only the silent screams of children.
One by one, they vanish. Numbers unknown and untold.
No one would ever dare to say “they don’t count.”

So why, with all urgency, aren’t we counting?



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