

Midwestern Service Provider Narratives of Migrant Experiences: Legibility, Vulnerability, and Exploitation in Human Trafficking

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Abstract: *This exploratory study examined the vulnerability and exploitation of migrants from the perspective of service providers who work in social service organizations. Researchers conducted 16 interviews and 1 focus group with service providers whose clientele had direct experience with migration. These service providers indicated that there is incongruence, even tension, between a welcoming local response to migrant populations and the state-level political rhetoric and policy initiatives, which are predominantly anti-immigration. This study demonstrates that there are contradictions and tensions related especially to exploitation in Midwest migrant populations. Service providers acknowledged complexity in the problems related to migrant vulnerability and exploitation and were interested in change. Findings of this study highlight particular vulnerabilities of migrant populations, a lack of legibility of human trafficking in social service organizations, and a difference between political rhetoric and local responses to migrant populations. Policies and practices in social service delivery need to reflect the subtleties of risk for exploitation and offer broad preventive support for migrant populations through education and advocacy.*

Keywords: *Service providers; human trafficking; vulnerability; migrants; labor exploitation*

Globalization and human mobility influence social service organizations across the world. In the United States of America and elsewhere, social workers interact with migrant populations soon, if not immediately, after their arrival. Whether their role is directly or indirectly related to cultural adjustment and negotiation, social workers have the potential to play critical roles in migration. Their “frontline” (Lipsky, 2010) work intersects with migrants when they are looking for employment, enrolling in school, establishing a home, learning a new language or culture, and understanding new systems of social welfare (Balgopal, 2000; Chang-Muy & Congress, 2008; Dominelli, 2010; Furman, Ackerman, Loya, Jones, & Negi, 2012; Nash, Wong, & Trlin, 2006; Valtonen, 2001). Increases in global migration influence many areas of society, including racial and ethnic diversity, religious diversity, family dynamics/inter-marriage, and public policy (National Academy of Sciences, 2015). These social workers and service providers can play an important role in the prevention of and identification of exploitation as they interact with migrant populations.

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As political, social, and economic forces shift over time, the terrain of social service delivery also shifts. Contemporary social workers who work with migrant populations face many new and difficult challenges (Ayón & Becerra, 2013; Chappell Deckert, 2016; Valtonen, 2001), and they have broadened their practice to focus not only on settlement but more keenly on integration and belonging (Ben-David, 1995) as well as preventing the heightened risk for exploitation. These challenges are complicated by globalization, a rise in nativism (a political position that prioritizes citizens over new residents or migrants), the marginalization of migrants (del Mar Farina, 2013), restrictive policy decisions that impact social welfare institutions (Ayón, 2016; Romero & Williams, 2013), and more flexible and transient patterns of human mobility (Kim, 2009; Sirojudin, 2009).

As awareness of human trafficking improves nationally, social workers become more knowledgeable of the potential exploitation migrants face. Social workers who work with migrant populations learn about human trafficking issues through changes in policy, interactions with clients, and public awareness campaigns. However, most of the information designed for social workers' use in this area of practice has a bias toward sex trafficking and has neglected other areas of potential exploitation (Alvarez & Alessi, 2012).

The goal of this research was to understand characteristics and behaviors associated with vulnerabilities to labor exploitation and human trafficking as expressed by Midwestern service providers. Using interviews and focus group methods, a research team from the University of Kansas worked with regional service providers from a variety of perspectives and public forums to find answers to the over-arching question: How do Midwestern service providers perceive migrant experiences related to vulnerability and exploitation? Answering this question fills a gap in the literature on human trafficking risks and vulnerabilities, and, as we learned, raised awareness of signs of trafficking among area service providers likely to come into contact with trafficked persons.

For the purposes of this paper, service providers include people who work or volunteer in positions that directly interact with clients by providing some kind of social service, including (but not limited to) education, healthcare and mental health services, occupational assistance/jobs/employment, legal services, social welfare, financial assistance, or community organization and advocacy. Social workers are employed in many of these social service organizations, but they are not the only ones who provide direct service to people seeking their services (Salett, 2006). Therefore, the focus of this inquiry includes social workers and other service providers who are in direct contact with migrant populations while delivering some sort of social service. In these positions, they hear stories directly from clients who describe the risks of living in a precarious condition. The perspectives of service providers in mental health, education, medical care, housing, and employment in this study helped address the gaps in the scholarship around this precarity. Their ability to work alongside clients through different challenges gives them unique knowledge that can assist researchers in understanding the potential for improved identification and response to risk (Hodge & Lietz, 2007; Kelleher & McGilloway, 2009). Including service providers from varied sectors of social service (more than just social work) provided us with a richer and more descriptive understanding of the experiences of vulnerable migrants.

Literature Review

There is much more scholarship related to vulnerability and exploitation of migrants in sex trafficking than there is in labor trafficking. This inquiry sought to understand this phenomenon through the perspective of service providers and the knowledge or assumptions they have surrounding trafficking. In order to do this, the research team considered the Midwestern context, values, and politics, definitions of trafficking and the scope of the problem, and social service provision for exploited and marginalized populations as they pertain to trafficking awareness and intervention.

Midwestern Context, Values, and Politics

With the goal of stimulating economic growth, many Midwestern states have recently embraced tax reduction policies in an effort to create smaller government and to become more “business-friendly.” Consequently, many of our interview participants indicated that social service provisions have been significantly cut, resulting in higher caseloads and reduced resources for many of these institutions. This causes stress for the service providers in addition to reducing quality of services for clients (Lipsky, 2010). Privatization, a common means to reduce state-provided social services, leads to fewer social service programs overall and reduces states’ ability to track trafficking operations (Peksen, Blanton, & Blanton, 2017).

The geography and economy of the Midwest make many areas prime locations for trafficking or exploitation to occur, and scholars have recently started to examine the Midwest as a potential site for trafficking (Heil & Nichols, 2015; Moser, 2015; Williamson & Prior, 2009). According to Gleason et al. (2016), regional characteristics may increase human trafficking, including a high number of military bases, areas with large immigrant communities, and direct routes for interstate travel, all of which describe the Midwestern context within this study. Additionally, farming and meat-packing industries attract migrants to these states for employment (Artz, 2012; Martin, 2012). The agricultural base lends itself to keeping people in isolation, a tactic O’Neill Richard (1999) describes as both logistically savvy and emotionally cruel.

Defining Trafficking and Understanding the Scope of the Problem

The U.S. defines severe forms of trafficking as “sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age” (U.S. Department of State, 2017, p. 3). It also includes “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery” (Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, 2000) While both the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (2000) and the Palermo Protocols (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2000) have a clear definition of labor trafficking in its many forms, global media attention, victim identification protocols, and survivor intervention services continue broadly to focus on sex trafficking.

According to the U.S. Department of State (2017), 66,520 survivors of sex trafficking and 17,465 labor trafficking survivors were identified in 2016 globally. Of those identified, there were 14,897 prosecutions for sex trafficking, and only 1,038 prosecutions for labor trafficking cases. Only 9,071 of the total number of cases led to convictions, and only 518 of those were labor trafficking. There were only 439 federal convictions of traffickers, and only an additional 387 cases at the state and local level (U.S. Department of State, 2017). In this inquiry, exploitation includes the misuse and abuse of a person for economic gain. Exploitation is broader in scope than these formal definitions of trafficking, and it may or may not lead to trafficking.

Since so much of the problem remains unidentified and hidden, the illicit nature of human trafficking presents countless methodological problems for researchers (Brennan, 2005; Weitzer, 2012, 2014; Zhang, 2012). There is widespread belief that the scope of human trafficking is much larger than reflected in government reports. Many trafficked persons are wary to come forward because they fear arrest, deportation, or retribution by traffickers on themselves or their families (Schwarz & Britton, 2015; Zhang, Spiller, Finch, & Qin, 2014). They may not even see themselves as trafficked (Brennan, 2008; Hoyle, Bosworth, & Dempsey, 2011; Musto, 2013).

Similarly, law enforcement agencies may not have training or protocols in place to identify and assist trafficked persons (Farrell, McDevitt, & Fahy, 2010) or conflate it with other forms of criminalized labor, such as sex work (Musto, 2016). This is especially pronounced in labor trafficking cases, where there are competing understandings of what constitutes labor exploitation, illegal immigration, human smuggling, and labor trafficking. When issues of labor trafficking become conflated with smuggling, law enforcement may fail to identify or intervene in human trafficking cases, so much so that researchers have called for stand-alone training and research on labor trafficking to increase understanding and identification of the crime (Barrick, Lattimore, Pitts, & Zhang, 2014).

In addition, much of the anti-trafficking discourse and rhetoric focuses on notions of an ideal victim, one who bears no culpability in their exploitation and who is deserving of protection and assistance (Chapkis, 2003; Hill, 2016; Hoyle et al., 2011; Musto, 2009; Sassen, 2002; Schwarz et al., 2016; Schwarz & Britton, 2015; Srikantiah, 2007; Stienstra, 1996). These narratives have real, material consequences for trafficking survivors and lead to missed opportunities to identify the broad range of exploited and vulnerable populations that may be trafficked. The construct of trafficking that solely involves passive women of color from the economically-struggling Global South who are victims that need to be saved by a white, Western legislative hero is one that enforces racism (Baker, 2013; Bromfield & Capous-Desyllas, 2012; Capous-Desyllas, 2007; Jones, Engstrom, Hilliard & Diaz, 2007; Lutnick, 2016; Mapp, 2016), diminishes individual agency, and limits prevention efforts that are concerned with trafficking outside of the realm of sex. As Srikantiah (2007) writes,

Iconic victims originate from cultures in Asia, Latin America, or Africa stereotyped as suppressing the individuality of women and girls and rendering them simple prey for manipulation by clever traffickers. The iconic victim concept

is thus consistent with stereotypes of foreign women and women of color as meek, helpless, and belonging to repressive male dominant cultures. (pp. 201-202)

This stereotypical narrative of iconic victimhood perpetuates larger tropes about women of color and restricts the potential to identify and assist survivors whose identities complicate or resist this construction.

Social Services for Exploited and Marginalized Population

Globalization has contributed to increasingly complex issues in social service delivery including labor migration, new forms of labor exploitation, and new platforms that increase risk (i.e. digital) (Agbényiga & Huang, 2012; Jones et al., 2007; Salett, 2006). Paired with free market models that encourage government downsizing through privatization, the demand for cheap or free labor is increasing dramatically (Peksen et al., 2017).

According to the *Trafficking in Persons Report* (U.S. Department of State, 2017), the global focus of investigations has been on sex trafficking, even while non-governmental organizations report serving higher numbers of labor trafficking survivors. Unlike sex trafficking, labor trafficking has not been prioritized or widely recognized by law enforcement or social service agencies (Barrick et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2014). Kaufka Walts (2017) identifies three reasons for this gap, including minimal research on labor trafficking, lack of attention to labor trafficking in legislative or policy efforts, and the lack of training for service providers (p. 62). While the risk factors are often similar for both labor and sex trafficking, such as sexual assault and mental health concerns, labor trafficking is less frequently identified by service providers (Schwarz, 2017). Similarly, many of the risk factors identified in trafficking research (poverty, housing instability, health concerns, strict gender roles with male dominance, and lack of legal status) are also evident in the broader migrant populations. Therefore, perspectives from service providers who attend to migrant populations can provide a window into the ways in which migrant vulnerability can lead to exploitation and trafficking.

Certainly, there is a need to expand conversations and research trends in human trafficking to include a deeper examination of labor trafficking and other forms of labor abuse, including the understanding that exploitation is the foundation of the abuse (Hayes & Unwin, 2016). This exploitation or result thereof may lead to some form of interaction with a social worker or other service provider in health care, child welfare, emergency shelters, or advocacy organizations (Jones et al., 2007). Still, social workers and other service providers are generally not trained to assess or intervene in the area of labor exploitation (Alvarez & Alessi, 2012; Capous-Desyllas, 2007).

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) does promote materials about trafficking that include both forced labor and exploitation (Abdus-Shakur, 2016; NASW, 2015b; Salett, 2006). However, the majority of materials that exist for social workers connected to human trafficking are related to sex. This is true in social work research as well (Okech, Choi, Elkins, & Burns, 2017). Alvarez and Alessi (2012) suggest social work adopt a broader definition of trafficking: “Human trafficking encompasses the transportation and subjugation of persons for financial gain” (p. 142), which would include both labor and sex trafficking. We refine this definition further, since human trafficking

does not have to include transportation, movement, or crossing borders. Both international standards and US law agree that trafficking can, but does not have to, include such transportation. Research suggests several indicators of trafficking that should be noted by social workers including debt bondage, unstable or overcrowded living spaces, hesitation to speak or seek services, lack of possession of key documents, inability or fear of moving, and poverty (Salett, 2006). Considering the Midwestern context, politics, demand for labor, and increasingly restrictive social welfare policies, this study sought to better understand the issues from the perspectives of direct service providers who are on the frontlines of receiving and attending to people at risk by asking the following research question: How do Midwestern service providers perceive migrant experiences related to vulnerability and exploitation?

Methods

For this study, all interviews were conducted with the approval of the University of Kansas's Institutional Review Board, and all the participants provided informed consent. In the Spring of 2016, seven graduate student researchers conducted interviews with service providers in Midwestern states whose clientele had direct experience with migrants. These organizations provided services in mental health, education, medical care, housing, and employment. Interviews were chosen for inclusion based on the connection they had to the provision of social services. The sixteen (out of 19) interviews chosen for inclusion for this study capture a range of sectors: legal officials, state legislators, educators, and immigration advocates. Additionally, they represented urban, rural, and suburban areas. Three interviews were not included due to the peripheral nature of the role of the respondent.

The research team worked collaboratively to develop interview protocols for different service providers including legal, advocacy, and social services. Questions for each of the protocols were consistent thematically, but they also permitted adjustment based on the different disciplinary or organizational perspectives. This guide included key questions with follow-up prompts and allowed for flexibility during the interview process. Interviews were designed to last approximately one hour. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours, depending on the participants' interest in the project and their time constraints. Interviews were conducted in English by members of the research team, either individually or in pairs.

In addition to these individual interviews, the same research team conducted a focus group with social work graduate students who had practicum placements in local social service agencies. The focus group was meant to provide additional information regarding perceptions of trafficking risk from a broader audience. Some of these students were working explicitly with migrant populations. However, all of the clientele they served had direct experience with vulnerability through poverty, mental health issues, or lack of employment or housing. The focus group lasted for approximately one hour and was conducted in English.

The individual interviews and focus group were digitally recorded and transcribed by the research team. These transcriptions were carefully de-identified and uploaded to a

secure network drive, only accessible by approved researchers for analysis. Transcriptions were uploaded into a qualitative analysis software program (ATLAS.ti), and they were read/analyzed for general themes using inductive strategies rooted in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In two separate working sessions, the research team collaboratively discussed the themes and developed a general coding scheme. From there, they designated team members to explore particular themes in all of the interview and focus group data. A second round of analysis included more focused coding related to each particular theme.

Findings

Through this project, contradictions and tensions related to labor trafficking in the Midwest region became clear in three areas: migrant vulnerability to exploitation, legibility of human trafficking, and political rhetoric versus local response. The first two areas illustrated by this study are well established in the literature. However, they warrant inclusion because the emphasis of this research was to highlight perspectives from an understudied region and to illustrate the perspectives of service providers. The first area highlighted specific vulnerabilities to exploitation among migrant service-users from the perspective of service providers (See Table 1). The second area highlighted a theme that human trafficking may not be legible from the perspective of service providers. The third area, which reflects a potentially novel contribution to the research, manifests the theme that state and national level political rhetoric about immigration is shaping policy decisions that do not necessarily align with local, organizational responses.

Migrant Vulnerability to Exploitation

The first theme identified by service providers in this inquiry emphasized the importance of social support and social networks in reducing vulnerability of migrant populations. Social networks serve as a cushion in an otherwise hostile environment.

Structural issues such as limited healthcare, transportation, housing, secure employment, and lack of community supports were all identified as barriers to helping migrant populations gain stability and reduce vulnerability to social ills. Participants recognized these vulnerabilities but did not always make the clear connection to trafficking and exploitation. Table 1 briefly introduces the themes of vulnerabilities that were identified by the service providers in our inquiry (in alphabetical order) and is followed by some descriptive examples from the data.

Table 1. *Vulnerability to Exploitation of Migrants as Perceived by Service Providers*

Vulnerability	Description
Documents withheld	Clients' documents have been withheld by trafficker to limit power or ability to leave
Employment or income precarity	Income withheld by intimate partner or trafficker, or access denied
English-only services	Not enough multilingual service providers and/or access to interpreters
Gender	Women are more vulnerable to trafficking
History of trauma or abuse	Participants refer to migrants' increased vulnerabilities due to generalized trauma, sexual and/or intimate partner violence, or substance abuse
Housing Instability	Migrants experience instability in housing due to legal status, financial resources, or because it is provided by employer.
Immigration Status	Whether the client has legal status to be in the United States
Isolation, physical and social	Being physically, culturally, or linguistically removed from social supports or networks.
Lack of Supervision	Minors left without adult supervision
Migrants' lack of understanding of English language and/or American culture	Inability to communicate in the dominant language and/or lack of familiarity with systems and institutions of the migrants' new culture

Documents withheld. One common method of disempowering the persons being trafficked is to hinder their ability to move freely by withholding their documentation that identifies who they are and indicates their status as migrants. While some workers are sponsored into the USA on H-1B visas and feel beholden to the sponsor of the visa, those visa holders may work for multinational companies that provide them with a support network and resources to learn their surroundings. In contrast, some workers find themselves dwelling in inhumane conditions with their co-workers, allowed out only to go to work where they are supervised constantly in low-wage positions. They are powerless to leave because their identification documents are being kept from them, and they are terrified to report to authorities because they are unaware of their rights. One participant said of their interaction with this vulnerability:

Some labor recruiter went to India and told them they could get them green cards if they each spent about \$20,000 to come to the United States and work in a ship yard. Some of them borrowed money, some of them mortgaged houses, some of them had savings, so this whole group of people came, and the real hope was that if they got green cards they could then bring their families. So they are immediately locked up, and they are actually given H-2B visas, guest worker visas and forced to work under pretty deplorable, unhealthy conditions, living in unhealthy conditions. Their passports were collected. They couldn't leave. And if they didn't keep working, they would lose the money, they would lose their houses, their fathers' houses, whatever they had done to get the money together.

Employment or income precarity. Not only are workers vulnerable to having their “documents, their driver's licenses, their visas, their passports, whatever they might have with them” taken by their trafficker, as was indicated by yet another service provider, lack of access to their income also entraps vulnerable migrants and impedes their leaving. Illegal, unethical, exploitative employment arrangements often mean very little income even though the migrant worker has fulfilled their work obligation. A participant reported:

They are brought in by... gang leaders ... as a gang of workers and the patrons, the leader is the one who gets paid, and he decides how much each person in the group makes. It is not a normal employment relationship. It's not a legal one. They just, they are like a subcontractor, and the dress it up by calling it a 'subcontractor,' but it's really a patron system, and if you screw up or piss off that person, you don't get paid.

English-only services. Providers recognized that their own inability to speak a language other than English as a barrier to serving migrants. Representative of this theme is the following excerpt:

We frequently advocate for interpreters at health appointments for our clients. Sometimes we provide that interpretation service. Sometimes we either are not able to for one reason or another or sometimes we just take the opportunity to advocate and say 'the clinic really needs to provide it, and this is why' kind of thing. It is really, sometimes it is very frustrating that this is still such a big barrier. It seems like it should be easier by now.

Gender. Participants suggested that migrant women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, which is congruent with the increased susceptibility of women to oppression that is recognized worldwide. Whether it be because of gender roles and associated social norms differing from their home nation and the U. S., or because patriarchal underpinnings create a climate where women are considered subordinate, many women are at an increased disadvantage when they migrate. One service provider described this inequality within the refugee population they served:

I think gender plays a huge impact, specifically working with refugees from certain countries. For instance, in Burma the gender roles seem...very...strict and rigid at times. So even when I'm communicating with refugee clients--let's say it's a heterosexual couple--prolonged eye contact, for instance with the wife could suggest a whole number of things that you wouldn't think of. I think that when those strict gender roles carry over into a new culture, I think that can still leave you particularly vulnerable.

Migrating with one's spouse who is likely from the same cultural milieu has its difficulties, but engaging in a relationship with someone from a different cultural background is also challenging when one person is put at a disadvantage because of perceived dominance or subordination. An example from the data that illustrates this imbalance:

I think the final one I would say and again related to sexuality would be some exploitative situations or easily lend themselves to exploitative situations where

you have an undocumented woman generally and an American man, and they enter into some sort of relationship...It so easily lends itself to exploitation.

Finally, the patriarchal construct of women as property of the male head of household undergirds this participant's statement that "A lot of the women's dads sell them to their husbands."

History of abuse or trauma. The prevalence with which people experience trauma and violence is alarming. Whether it be domestic violence, child abuse, or past exploitation, often at the hands of a loved one, these factors increase vulnerability to further exploitation from the perspectives of many participants. Having a history of trauma was mentioned numerous times, with domestic violence repeatedly identified as a risk factor for exploitation. These experiences were often combined with other risks for vulnerability as identified by a participant, "Typically, there is substance abuse. There is history of trauma; they're undocumented and typically indigenous. Feeling very vulnerable, like they don't have rights." The perception that it is socially acceptable in some cultures, even normal, to experience abuse at the hands of an intimate partner was described by a participant in this way:

The second area is domestic abuse and sexual violence, particularly prevalent in my experience...we helped people get visas, U Visas because they're victims of sexual violence and domestic abuse...and in fact I think, maybe not sexual abuse, but domestic violence is culturally accepted in many ways.

The logistics of migration itself create openings for trauma as well, as voiced by this participant:

They're a lot of things that happen before they come here which is why they're here. Or they happen when they were crossing the borders. I worked with a woman who was raped by a coyote.

Housing instability. One theme that emerged in the conversations with most participants addressed the instability many people face, and the nature of homelessness in the area. Women appear particularly vulnerable when it comes to housing and financial disempowerment. They often have children they are trying to care for and keep safe, as illustrated by this participant:

So housing is a huge thing. Because obviously if you don't have rental history, if you don't have proof of income. Like these are thing that are consistently demanded with U.S. housing. So we have established partnerships and relationships with the apartment complexes in [name of county]. ... If they just don't have any of these demanded documents or proof then they aren't even considered.

Immigration status. It comes as no surprise that service providers recognize the stress experienced by migrants without legal documentation. Not only does this status increase the hardship of securing gainful employment, it leads to increased vulnerability to exploitation due to the migrants' perceptions that they have no rights, as indicated here:

There is still that underlying fear of not having papers I am using their terminology, 'I don't have any papers.' Having no papers and feeling very vulnerable, you have to put up with things that other people don't have to put up with.

Additional support for this theme came from these participants who stated: "I have heard from my friends in [Urban City 2], it was about 40% of their population is undocumented workers and undocumented kids. And they would be more apt to not report anything that might happen" as well as "Probably helping the families find ways to be here legally without feeling like they have to keep a step ahead of being caught... it's kinda a scary time in our country frankly, with the whole Donald Trump campaign."

Physical and social isolation. The interview data clearly indicated that physical and social isolation increase vulnerabilities to exploitation and should be considered by service providers of migrant populations. Service providers talked about the physical isolation that migrants face, including very limited transportation. They only go where their employers want to take them, and in rural areas often do not have the bus systems they need to get to services.

Social isolation was also identified as an area of vulnerability. For example:

I think where you have problems is in places in more rural areas, how you get the networks to reach in those areas is going to be a challenge...I think you know, part of what [Non-Profit Law Firm 2] does...we have a migrant farm workers program that deal...workers who move from state to state or some sort of agricultural crop, and they face a whole variety of issues but their job and where they live is on site, and so if the employer doesn't want someone on the property to talk with those people, you can't get on the property to talk to those people.

Lack of supervision. Participants identified a distinct difference between the vulnerabilities of migrant adults and minors, although there is a great deal of overlap in the characteristics that increase vulnerability to exploitation. Children experience increased risks of exploitation simply because they rely on others for their care, transportation, and access to most services they would ever need. They are subordinate to (most) adults in that they are generally physically weaker, have less life-wisdom due to inexperience, and as is often the manner of youth, trusting and unaware that their situation puts them at risk. Participants shared their concerns about young people being left unsupervised and the increase in vulnerability because of this: "We are concerned particularly for our teenage girls, particularly if they have a single parent and they are coming from a single parent household and maybe that parent is working second or third shift." Additionally, one indicated that they were

...Just worried about supervision, even though the child might be at an age where it is OK that they are home because they are 16 or 17 but just ensuring that they are safe and that they are not victimized.

Migrants' lack of understanding English language and/or American culture. While one's ethnicity or cultural background do not inherently increase vulnerability, immigrating from another country without a thorough understanding of American culture

and/or English increase the risk of exploitation. Tied directly to this theme is the vulnerability often felt by people who are at the mercy of smugglers when trying to immigrate to the US without going through legal channels to do so. Many immigrants are just not prepared for the intricacies of American culture and the people who are more than happy to prey upon their ignorance. One respondent reflected:

I think maybe also just not knowing the culture. For instance, we had one gentleman who found a job on his own and thankfully he continued to talk with his case manager about it, but it was not a positive situation. I mean the manager was quite verbally abusive, the pay was not what it should be, and so thankfully he was in communication with us, and we advised him that he needed to leave that job.

Another stated:

... limited English proficient, coming from different places, not understanding the legal system at all, or people often don't understand what rights they might have...and I think you know, access to quality education, I think affects people too, cause they feel like they don't read or understand well when they're faced with these legal documents that people give them, they just sign them, they don't read them, and then they don't understand what kind of debt they're getting into that, that makes them, it makes it unsurmountable for them – payday loans, that people are frequently signing, they don't understand how it works.

Legibility of Human Trafficking

A second key theme identified by service providers relates to the legibility of human trafficking. Schwarz and Britton (2015) write,

The defunding of social services and the welfare state continues to distance the members of society most vulnerable to trafficking from the institutions and structure they most need. In particular, the bodies and lives that are the least legible then become even more separated from the democracy that was intended to include them. (pp. 64-65)

Service providers negotiate the meaning of “human trafficking” in very different ways. Service providers serve migrants who are also survivors of trauma on a daily basis, yet many providers may unintentionally fail to connect the actual lived experiences of their clients to trafficking policies and provisions that protect survivors (Chapkis, 2003). This confusion, paired with anti-immigration rhetoric and restrictive social welfare policies, contributes to a climate in which individuals fail to read themselves into trafficking narratives. They are often not legible within the more common perceptions of what trafficking looks like.

The data from these interviews indicated that there is a gap between what people perceive as trafficking and how it is defined or treated as a result of policy. Most of the awareness campaigns and efforts toward prevention that these service providers discussed specifically highlighted young girls involved in sex trafficking and did not address labor exploitation or other forms of trafficking risk. Additionally, anti-trafficking rhetoric that focuses on kidnapping and abduction ignores the possibilities that people could be coerced

or exploited in other ways. For example, several interview participants initially said they had no experience with trafficking and suggested we interview other people. However, when we explained the definition of trafficking from the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (2000), they realized that the exploitation many of their clients faced could be identified as, or lead to, labor trafficking. For example, one service provider working with a migrant advocacy organization stated they see similarities in the work they do:

...we deal with issues in the global economy that include migration. And while human trafficking isn't going to come up directly, there are so many similarities between the kinds of abuses you find that we call human trafficking and the kinds of working conditions that undocumented people face or people who are brought in—in the labor gangs. To me, the line is very fuzzy, between what's human trafficking and what's just your standard abuse of workers who are undocumented.

This service provider denied having a connection to trafficking and then, while answering, renegotiated its meaning. Acknowledging a “fuzzy” line between trafficking and various working conditions not only makes identifying trafficking difficult, it means that providers and advocates may be dismissing the possibility that trafficking occurs to their organizations' clients outright.

Another participant who works with refugee resettlement in the United States pushed back on the idea that she was working with trafficked individuals. This social worker initially thought that only her former employment agency addressed trafficking, but she stopped and retracted:

I guess I should back up and say that I am sure that we have, if you are talking about folks who have been trafficked prior to them coming to the US, then yes we have served them...So, I mean, it depends what your definition of trafficking is...But we have folks coming from situations where they have paid smugglers or traffickers for safe passage out of their home country or things like that that was not "safe passage."

Each of these examples considers the relationship individual service providers have with the definition of “human trafficking.” Within the interview process itself, several participants became aware of their potential connections or interactions with clients who may be in fact be survivors of human trafficking. This is an interesting finding: that the very process of discussing trafficking with these service organizations helped clarify the ways in which their organization needed to address their work with potentially exploited clients.. Conversations within interviews themselves appeared epiphanic and perhaps transformative as indicated by reflections in the data.

Access to services/resources was critically important to these service providers. They expressed a desire to go to where the clients are and to take services to them, especially considering that these are populations that in some cases are hidden: “They are not out looking for social service organizations; they are not out.” There was also a desire to build collaborative services in an effort to increase access. Service providers were committed to

both quality and access in their care: "...even people without insurance deserve the best quality that they could get."

The majority of participants expressed that their organizations lacked training in human trafficking, lacked a protocol for identifying human trafficking, and lacked specific procedures for intervening and assisting survivors. Most service organizations represented in the interviews did not have a working definition of trafficking. They were often apologetic about their lack of direct experience in trafficking.

Political Rhetoric Versus Local Response

In addition to the legibility question, a third theme demonstrated that Midwest service provider narratives illustrated a tension between national and state-level political rhetoric and local community responses to migrant populations in the Midwest. Service providers discussed their need to negotiate political and governmental approaches that restrict rights for migrant populations with a Midwestern ethos of generosity and welcome. A service provider working with migrants in the Midwest worried about anti-immigrant sentiment in political and governmental rhetoric:

Prior to [the Paris attacks] I would say that families were very much welcomed, and I did not really have concerns about how they were being accepted or what it meant in the wider community. Now, because of where things are at, and some of the thoughts and beliefs we hear about, I have greater concerns about whether the families coming to this area are being fully welcomed.

The service provider also noted that they have seen an increase in support for the work of the organization:

...I see as a silver lining of things, is that I've had a lot more volunteers coming forward and saying 'how can we support your agency?' and what you do. Even one entity used the word--kind of I see this as our congregations' resistance to what we are hearing [in the media]...a lot of people are saying, 'no, we want to be welcoming. How can we get involved?'

Considering increased political restrictions on refugees and migrants, our research team also asked Midwestern service providers for their perspectives on their motivation to continue to provide services. Their responses reflected both individual and systemic issues that drive vulnerability and exploitation of migrant populations, and many used a specific lens of religion, ethos, and their self-described Midwestern norms that motivated them to action.

First, service providers identified areas of structural oppression and injustice that create difficulties for migrant populations and motivate the service providers to work for change. Specifically, they highlighted poverty, gender inequality, anti-immigrant sentiment, corruption, healthcare access, trauma, and economic forces that contribute to problems of exploitation and vulnerability. These issues can layer one on top of another and create complicated and dense situations of vulnerability.

Second, providers identified ways in which social policies (particularly related to welfare reform and immigration) increase the risk of exploitation. Due to desperation, trauma, and lack of assistance, the people with whom they work are forced into compromising situations of employment. These injustices move service providers to action: “I just felt duty-bound to get involved and try to do something.” Many of them mentioned strong desires for policy shifts and expanded supports and the expansion of social services. Service providers listen to the experiences of migrants in their organizational contexts and try to translate those experiences into a call for social change. One service provider who provided education to migrants stated: “I want it [human slavery] to be disturbing for everyone involved. And to not let things go by the wayside. It *should* bother us.” These findings are reflective of previous research related to structural oppression and the risk of exploitation (Berg, 2015; Gleason et al., 2016; Lutnick, 2016; Schwarz & Britton, 2015; Todres, 2011). However, it highlights that in the midst of staunch political rhetoric that is anti-immigrant, anti-poor, and anti-assistance, there are voices that reflect a Midwestern narrative that is welcoming, generous, and kind.

Finally, service providers encountered various legal and ethical issues in their work, most prominently mentioning issues of legal status and the risks associated when migrants are not authorized or undocumented: “...undocumented workers and undocumented kids...they would be more apt to not report anything that might happen.” The fear of talking and a lack of understanding basic rights inhibit the helping process. Service providers appear to be motivated by a need for more integrated approaches and more legislative reform for protections. One provider stated, “I am really hoping that we can get something done legislatively...I just want to see it get strengthened.” In addition to identifying structures that needed to change, service providers also recognized that they could do more personally: “I feel trapped by my limited language ability,” and “I am sure there are times where we were working with clients, and we did not do a good enough job of explaining what’s going on...” This indicates a feeling of unpreparedness among service providers.

Discussion

This study explored the perspectives of service providers related to the exploitation of migrant populations and their vulnerability to trafficking. Findings indicate three main areas of emphasis which are discussed in the previous section: 1). Vulnerabilities of migrant populations, 2). A lack of legibility of human trafficking in social service organizations, and 3). A difference between political rhetoric and local responses to migrant populations. In order to address the specific vulnerabilities to exploitation identified by our interview respondents, systemic and community issues that affect exploitation must be addressed. This includes access to services, social and economic inequality, citizenship status, transportation, and language, and is reflective in other literature related to trafficking risks as well (Baker, 2013; Berg, 2015; Lutnick, 2016; Okech et al., 2017; Todres, 2011; Warren, 2016). Collaboration between service providers is also important. It was clear from these interviews that there are not enough resources to adequately support migrant populations and/or the motivation to improve these services at the regional level.

The NASW, in the latest version of *Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* (2015a), has addressed the expectation that services be provided

in the “client’s preferred language with the proficiency required,” (p. 45) which could mean keeping professional interpreters on staff, certainly for commonly spoken languages represented by the migrant population in the geographic area. Federally-funded entities are required to provide an interpreter, yet many migrants speak indigenous languages for which interpreters are rare.

Related to access and mobilization of resources for clients, social service interventions need to be formed around social networks (Negi, Michalopoulos, Boyas, & Overdorff, 2013). Recognizing the importance of social networks, service providers were motivated to help link their clients into key relationships, connecting them to social networks so they can be a meaningful part of a community. They identified how healthy community and family connections can serve as a buffer against situations of exploitation. There is also a need to increase the knowledge base by educating social workers and other service providers about migration-related policy and trauma-informed care to improve their skills and understanding of vulnerability to exploitation and to expand research related to social networks.

Regarding legibility, social workers and other service providers need to broaden their understanding of trafficking to include narratives of exploitive practices so that they can successfully identify people being trafficked and help survivors navigate systems of assistance. A risk factor for labor exploitation identified by Schwarz (2017) was prior (and unsuccessful) involvement with a social service provider. This indicates that survivors were seeking some sort of assistance, but their vulnerabilities for exploitation went unaddressed. For example, a client who seeks a health assessment may not be asked if they feel socially isolated or fear deportation. A holistic evaluation of individual cases will help identify risks earlier so that interventions are more effective (Barrick et al., 2014; Simmelink & Shannon, 2012). Helping providers understand the full range trafficking policy and intervention tools could help them identify and assist their clients who may be vulnerable to various forms of trafficking. Educational and prevention programs to educate social service organization staff and advocacy groups on labor and trafficking practices as they relate to exploitation must increase in quality and frequency (Hodge & Lietz, 2007; Salett, 2006).

The “fuzzy” lines related to defining trafficking make it difficult for service providers to connect trafficking risks with more commonly understood social problems. When legibility among service providers is evident, that may filter to service-users as well. Schwarz and Britton (2015) argue that trafficking prevention is elusive without shifting structural factors such as gender, class, and sexuality inequalities. Our data aligns with previous research that argues this connection needs to be strengthened.

This study was conducted in a very politically conservative region of the country, where gubernatorial executive orders restrict services to migrant populations. Still, it is important to note that these interviews were conducted in the early months of the 2016 presidential campaign, and since then the social and political divide regarding perceptions of migrants has deepened. Regardless of political restrictions, local communities are stepping in and offering assistance and, in some cases, providing sanctuary for migrant populations. Service providers need training in migration policy and public advocacy in

order to protect themselves, their agencies, and the people they are trying to help from unwelcome attention.

It is also important for social workers and other service providers to pay attention to systemic issues such as lack of affordable housing, which is related to the vulnerability of precarious housing, power, privilege, and oppression (Alvarez & Alessi, 2012; Okech et al., 2017). These systemic narratives are often omitted from interventions for trafficking. However, they are the perfect venues for identifying preventive strategies (Schwarz & Britton, 2015). Migrants and others who live in a state of precarity need access to a safe place to live, sustainable and supportive employment, and quality health care and education. Social workers are professionally positioned to do this work. Increasing the training and support in community social welfare organizations is consistent with other recommendations in social work research (Okech et al., 2017) and echoed across other sectors, such as law enforcement (Farrell et al., 2010; Owens et al., 2014) and medical providers (Becker & Bechtel, 2015; Powell, Dickins, & Stoklosa, 2017). This area can be enhanced in social work practice across social institutions. Social workers can fine tune assessment strategies and expand referral options for quality education, transportation, medical care, and mental health services. They can also advocate for policy changes to support migrant populations and create sustainable migration reform

Participants referred to assisting clients with obtaining U Visas, which are available to survivors of violent crimes (including certain forms of trafficking) who work with law enforcement to investigate or prosecute offenders (Warren, 2016), yet the T Visa is another tool to assist immigrants. The T Visa, which makes it possible for survivors of human trafficking to obtain legal residency if they cooperate with law enforcement to investigate or prosecute their traffickers, can be transformative for clients if social workers understand the procedure and collaborate to develop accessible processes in their communities. The T Nonimmigrant status (T visa) provision was enacted, along with the U Visa, under the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (2000). The T Visa has the potential to reframe victimization into a more positive opportunity by allowing trafficked survivors, who are in the United States as a result of being trafficked, to eventually gain legal residency, and then U.S. citizenship. As Warren (2016) recommended with regard to the U Visa, in order for the T Visa to be fully realized, Congress must mandate nationwide training to develop consistent procedures to enable clients to access these visas. Social workers and other social service professionals cannot wait for a governmental revision to include the funding required to fill this need. They can fulfill an essential role in working with local and state law enforcement, labor divisions, and organizations that serve migrant populations to utilize both the T Visa's and U Visa's potential to identify and stop human trafficking.

Limitations

While the intent of this study was to understand the perceptions of service providers, one drawback is that there are no direct voices of people with lived experience of migration themselves. This is a broader problem in migration literature, as talking with people who have recently experienced migration must be addressed with sensitivity. A second limitation of this study relates to the interview process for this study. Even though the

research team met together to develop interview questions and discuss interviewing strategies, the actual nuances of the interviews themselves may have varied. Finally, only one interview was conducted with each service provider. Multiple interactions may have provided more depth and detail to the interviews.

Recommendations and Future Research

Social work's ecological perspective acknowledges a need for services across practice levels. Social workers can offer this perspective to other service providers in helping to address trauma and interpersonal issues while simultaneously helping to navigate systemic issues that contribute to exploitation. Social workers are poised to lead in collaboration with others to train community members in recognizing and intervening in suspected trafficking. Their participation with local law enforcement and policy-makers is essential to challenging the structures and practices that enable predatory individuals to take advantage of vulnerable people. Services need to include approaches that are not linear, are flexible/adaptable to client needs, and are interactive and client-driven (Chappell Deckert, 2016). Service providers need to establish trusting relationships so the potential for deeper issues of exploitation to be uncovered readily exists (Hayes & Unwin, 2016). Further inquiry is warranted for a more complete understanding about how conversations about trafficking and exploitation create changes in service provision.

One principle of social work education is to develop professional resourcefulness and alliance with our clients. These skills put social workers in the forefront of the social services, assisting migrants who have left behind everything that they knew with regard to language, culture, and social systems either by choice or by force. As social workers, we are called by our ethical code and values to aid trafficking survivors with competent service that enhances dignity and well-being. This is a justice concern of utmost importance, and we must be prepared to act responsibly and with sensitivity.

This study's qualitative nature did not seek to quantify the increased effects of additional variables of vulnerability on one's susceptibility to exploitation. Knowing how much more vulnerable a person is because of the complexity of their life situation may awaken policy-makers to the needs of vulnerable and marginalized people, but it has failed thus far. More resources are needed in general: to get people to their services, to keep children safe, to teach parents the skills they need to be better parents, to help people feel less isolated and see themselves as worthy members of their communities, and to prosecute those who prey upon the many vulnerable people with whom we create a society.

The three areas highlighted by this study (vulnerabilities of migrant populations, a lack of legibility of human trafficking in social service organizations, and a difference between political rhetoric and local responses to migrant populations) move the profession forward by illustrating key issues from the perspective of those who most directly interact with migrant populations through social services. Addressing the vulnerabilities to exploitation can prevent further marginalization, bring the hidden parts of the problem to the forefront, and build networks of support across community agencies. Responding to structural oppression and advocating for stronger social welfare policies, in addition to clarifying the "fuzzy line" identified by the respondents of what is/is not exploitive will help to improve

legibility and access to services. Finally, understanding the incongruence, or tension of restrictive immigration and social welfare policies against the motivation of grassroots communities to respond in a welcoming and generous manner will help social workers feel empowered and hopeful as they create communities that can support and encourage these vulnerable populations.

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