Estimating the Prevalence of Human Trafficking in Ohio: Executive Summary Report

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February 1, 2019

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As defined by the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (otherwise known as the Trafficking Victims Protection Act [TVPA]), human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to exploit another person through commercialized sex or involuntary labor. In cases involving minors, however, the use of force, fraud or coercion does not have to be present for the offense to be classified as sex trafficking because a minor cannot legally consent to commercial sex. Although legislation has been created to combat trafficking, estimating the prevalence of these crimes is a complex challenge for researchers across public health, criminal justice, and social service contexts. In the current academic and policy literature there are no agreed upon estimates of the number of human trafficking victims. These efforts are further hindered due to the clandestine nature of human trafficking and the failure to recognize exploitation when it occurs. This is especially true when trying to estimate the number of minors or other individuals with sustained or peripheral contact with other social service agencies and institutions such as the juvenile justice and child welfare systems (Anderson, England, & Davidson, 2017; Cole & Sprang, 2014; Epstein & Edelman, 2014; Finklea, Fernandes-Alcantara, & Siskin, 2015; Gibbs, Walters, Lutnick, Miller, & Kluckman, 2015; Hepburn & Simon, 2010; Laczko & Gozdziak, 2005; Schauer & Wheaton, 2006). Individuals who never make contact with social service providers or justice system agencies pose a different type of challenge because they are never identified for intervention. Thus, the extent of unidentified human trafficking victimization is unknown. Nevertheless, researchers have attempted to quantify the prevalence of these events to better inform prevention efforts. Obtaining accurate and reliable prevalence estimates is essential in defining the scope of human trafficking, understanding where trafficking cases are concentrated and who is affected, and allocating resources and intervention efforts appropriately. In this context, the current study seeks to extend prior research to estimate the prevalence of minors and young adults who are known victims and at risk for trafficking in Ohio.

The Ohio Governor's Office and numerous local and state child welfare agencies across Ohio have taken an active role in understanding and addressing human trafficking. Governmental and non-governmental agencies have created a state-level task force, funded research studies, provided services for victims, trained first responders and other key stakeholders on how to identify potential trafficking victims, and passed anti-trafficking legislation (e.g., Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force, 2017). The Ohio Attorney General's Office published results from its first human trafficking prevalence study in the same year the anti-trafficking legislation was passed (Williamson et al., 2010). To accomplish this, Williamson and colleagues integrated information from multiple sources and prominent research studies to inform their methods. The research team analyzed newspaper articles, governmental reports, and non-governmental reports on human trafficking and related issues (e.g., sweatshop, labor trafficking, minors and prostitution, brothel, and massage parlor) in Ohio. They calculated the number of at-risk youth who were runaways, homeless, or had other indicators of vulnerability (e.g., potentially being involved in child protective services, foster care, abusive homes) that could make them susceptible to trafficking. The end result of this research was a prevalence estimate tailored to Ohio: there were 1,078 American-born Ohio youth (aged 12 to 17) that were estimated to have been trafficked for sex over a one-year period.

The study conducted by Williamson and colleagues was one of the first steps in shifting Ohio's response towards human trafficking. The estimate provided by the authors gave support that trafficking was likely a pervasive problem in the state—and demonstrated that it was going to require a concerted response. Prior to this report, there were only limited details on trafficking cases in Ohio and it focused on two cities—Columbus and Toledo (see Wilson & Dalton, 2008). Williamson and colleagues, however, provided a state-level prevalence estimate based on the resources available at the time. Since this research was initially conducted, the state of Ohio has prioritized funding and created strategic policy efforts to combat human trafficking, including updating knowledge about the prevalence of human trafficking in Ohio. Both local and state agencies have improved data systems to identify and record human trafficking events. For example, the Governor's Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force (OHTTF) summarizes data available from state agencies and grant-funded service providers to provide information on individuals who are identified within these systems. Between 2014 and 2015, victims were identified by the Ohio Network of Children's Advocacy Centers (n = 165), child welfare (n = 112), the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services—Refugee services (n = 8), the Ohio Attorney General (n = 384), and the Health and Human Services Grant Partnership (n = 104) (OHTTF, 2017). Because these agencies do not share identifying information to determine if the same victim is receiving services from multiple agencies, there is no way to distinguish the number of duplicate victims across the frequency counts in the report. With more specific details from separate agencies, however, it is possible to establish a more precise prevalence estimate of known and at-risk victims based on existing agency records.

As the support for this study indicates, the agenda to continue to study human trafficking within the state has persisted. Prior research, more generally and specifically within Ohio, has provided a foundation for the current initiative. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to fill gaps in knowledge about the prevalence of human trafficking in Ohio, with a focus on the number of youth victims by calculating more precise estimates of known victims and at-risk youth. This study seeks to calculate more precise estimates of known victims and at-risk individuals who are minors or young adults. To extend prior literature, the current study focused on integrating existing agency records and reports of human trafficking events. The use and integration of state and local data is a first step in calculating more precise estimates of known victims and at-risk individuals who are vulnerable to trafficking in Ohio. To that end, we consider the typology of different data sources to contextualize these prevalence estimates. This report outlines our study findings including (1) the type of information available to measure human trafficking in Ohio, (2) estimates of known human trafficking victims and at-risk individuals in Ohio, (3) lessons learned regarding current capabilities and capacities to estimate human trafficking victimization, and (4) recommendations for future prevalence research, intervention efforts, and policy considerations.

Methods

Data for this study were collected from agencies, providers, and newspaper sources between October 2017 and November 2018. Human trafficking was defined by the federal Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, as amended (22 U.S.C. §§ 7101-7110):

Sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act, in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age.

Labor trafficking is 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.

To determine the scope of human trafficking victimization, the research team gathered details on human trafficking victims who had been identified across various sources of information or who were determined to be at high risk of victimization. The research team identified possible sources of state and local data including official government reports, data collected from various state-level agencies, justice system records, and aggregate reports of vulnerable populations. In total 14 distinct data sources were collected and analyzed. This included eight (8) existing data sources from state and local agencies with individual-level information, four (4) aggregate reports of human trafficking victimization without individual-level information, and two (2) databases of newspaper accounts of human trafficking events in Ohio. The data were collected from records dating 2013 to 2018. However, the majority of data were from calendar years 2014, 2015, and 2016 (roughly 95% across individual and aggregate sources). We also included estimates for both known victims and at-risk individuals.

Existing Agency Data. Eight distinct data sources in the study included individual-level information on human trafficking victims. Table 1 provides a summary of the general characteristics of each individual-level data source including (1) a brief agency description, (2) year range for data collected for this study, and (3) definitions used to define known victims and at-risk individuals. The descriptive statistics for these eight sources provided insights into the type of information collected across sources and the characteristics of individuals identified as known victims or at-risk individuals.

Aggregate Data. In addition to the individual-level data, where available, we included aggregate counts from agencies unable to share individual-level details. This included four additional sources of data from 2013 to 2016 on flagged, known victims and at-risk individuals by each agency. These data included counts of (1) refugee youth identified through state and local child welfare data (n = 13 known victims; years: 2014 to 2016), (2) youth identified through child abuse service providers prior to the availability of individual-level data (n = 141 known victims; years: 2013 to 2015), (3) human trafficking victims identified by law enforcement (n = 535 known victims; years: 2014 to 2016), and (4) at-risk youth identified by examining patterns of risk factors within state and local child welfare data from Child Welfare B for youth who did were not flagged as human trafficking cases, but shared similar risk factors (n = 3,222 at-risk individuals; years: 2014 to 2016).

Table 1. Existing Agency Data Source Descriptions and Human Trafficking Definitions

		State HT Response	Child Welfare A	Child Welfare B	Law Enforcement	Legal System A	Legal System B	Legal System C	Juvenile Justice
Agency Description		Grant-funded program that emphasized identification and referral of foreign national survivors to community-based programs	State and local agencies responding to child abuse	State and local child abuse and neglect investigations, services, and foster care	Victims identified as part of law enforcement and arrest record data	Specialty court for victims	Legal services for victims	Specialty court for victims	County and state-level juvenile offense and risk assessment data
Year Range		2014-2017	2015-2017	2014-2016	2014-2016	2014-2016	2015-2018	2014-2018	2014-2016
Definition(s) of Human Trafficking[a]	**Known**	Not specified by database	ORC 2905.32; Mainly identified by police when referred for services	ORC 2905.32 and additional definition details[b]; Substantiated cases after further investigation	ORC 2905.32 (victims associated with offense code)	ORC 2905.32 (individuals commonly charged with prostitution and diverted from justice system as victims of HT)	Children subjected to sexual violence and exploitation and other forms of violence because of commercial sex involvement	Any commercial sex exchange with anyone would indicate the youth as a trafficking victim	TVPA (researcher classified based on prostitution-related offenses for minors—ORC 2907.21-.22 and 2907.24-.25)[d]
	At-Risk	Not specified by database	Flagged by agency as suspected based on case-level details	Flagged by case worker as suspected HT based on initial allegations	Individuals arrested for ORC 2907.21-.24 (researcher classified)[c]	Not applicable	Not applicable	Flagged by court as suspected HT based on risk factors (e.g., running away, safety issues)	Researcher classified based on several additional ORC indicators and HT risk factors[e]

Notes: HT = Human trafficking; ORC = Ohio Revised Code; TVPA = Trafficking Victims Protection Act. [a]Agency defined and/or research team defined—any definitions classified by research team are specified. [b]Child Welfare Source B defines trafficking as follows: "Human trafficking of a child refers to the act of recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing or obtaining a minor child for involuntary servitude or commercial sex acts. Sex trafficking also includes patronizing or soliciting a minor child (any person under eighteen years of age) for the purpose of a commercial sex act. A commercial sex act means any sex act for which anything of value is given to or received by any person (see ORC 2905.32 for more info)" (personal communication, May 15, 2018). [c]ORC in data included 2907.21 (compelling prostitution), 2907.22 (promoting prostitution), 2907.23 (enticement or solicitation to patronize a prostitute; procurement of a prostitute), and 2907.24 (soliciting—after positive HIV test). [d] ORC in data included 2907.21 (compelling prostitution), 2907.22 (promoting prostitution), 2907.24 (soliciting—after positive HIV test), and 2907.25 (prostitution—after positive HIV test). [e]At-risk cases classified based on ORC offenses (2907.321j [pandering obscenity involving a minor]; 2907.322 [pandering sexually-oriented material involving a minor]; 2907.323 [illegal use of a minor in nudity-oriented material or performance]) and the presence of multiple risk factors (e.g., abuse/neglect, running away, truancy, substance use).

Child Welfare B defined at-risk cases as individuals, aged 0-17, who had four or more of the following risk factors associated with their case: (1) history of child sexual abuse; (2) history of running away (four or more times in the past year); (3) history of homelessness; (4) history of truancy; (5) history of juvenile court involvement; (6) history of CPS involvement, including foster care; (7) history of drug use; (8) history of psychiatric admissions; (9) history of multiple sexual partners; and (10) history of sexually transmitted infections and/or pregnancy. Similar to the Juvenile Justice data, these risk factors were selected due to their well-documented correlation with human trafficking victimization. Individual-level information was not available for these cases to estimate with the stacked data, but they were included in some of the estimates. The logic behind developing these agency profiles and characterizing these sources is critical in considering the type of information included, as well as coverage of information, in each data source to help refine the estimates.

Prior to data analysis we undertook an extensive processing protocol. This was designed to remove clear duplicate cases within each data set and maximize the range of fields available for the analysis. We first developed a checklist of available data fields identified in the study proposal and refined that as we obtained data from sources. We then integrated information for each data file so that we had a common set of measures that could be used to identify redundant cases and describe pools of known victims and at-risk individuals. This process led to a single, "stacked" database comprising eight sets of individual case records from the sources described in the table above. That file balanced potentially useful identification fields available in only some files with a core set of measures that was present in multiple data files.

Using the processed data, we estimated unique known victims and at-risk individuals identified by agencies. Data analysis was conducted in multiple stages where we first integrated data sources in order to eventually produce contextualized prevalence counts. We then engaged in a process of manual and automated data checking to develop individual and pooled estimates across all data sets. This process had two aims: (1) sorting observed **individuals known as victims** or **individuals who were designated as at-risk** for victimization and (2) identifying and adjusting estimated counts for potential duplicate cases.

Summary of Key Findings

Over the last five years, several state and local agencies have collected systematic information on victims of human trafficking in Ohio. Through the data collection process, we found that the extent of the information collected—and ability to share data—can vary widely by agency. As described previously, data availability, data type, and the extent of coverage within and across datasets is variable. The current study provided the first comprehensive examination and analysis of the types of human trafficking data currently available in Ohio. The key findings are summarized below.

What information is available to measure human trafficking in Ohio—and what is missing?

- A number of existing agency records on human trafficking victims were unavailable to the research team. This was primarily due to limited capacity to translate record-keeping systems into sharable data and/or ability to share the data due to agency restrictions.

- Many human trafficking victims are not reached by social service or legal systems and remain unaccounted for in prevalence estimates. In this context, the current record data samples allow some assessment of what details are collected and what details are overlooked.

What is the prevalence of human trafficking in Ohio?

We identified various counts of known human trafficking victims and individuals at risk for human trafficking victimization based on different data exclusion/inclusion criteria and duplication checks.

- Based on existing data sources and our "best estimate," there were **1,032 known victims during the study timeframe** (95% Confidence Interval [CI] = 970—1,097). This removed all identified duplicates and included aggregate reports, but also made some adjustment for potential overlap in those counts and individual records from the child welfare agencies.
- We identified approximately **4,209 at-risk individuals** (95% CI = 4,083—4,338) based on an extensive duplicate case check, including aggregate reports but without juvenile justice-identified risk.
- In addition to these estimates, the Juvenile Justice data identified approximately **1,200 at risk individuals** but we reported them separately because of differences in definitional criteria.

Based on our assessment of the available information on human trafficking in Ohio that can be used for research purposes, these estimates are likely very conservative relative to the true number of victims. Figure 1 summarizes our "best" estimates from the known victim and at-risk individual categories. Those estimates were identified because they reflect our best judgment based on an attempt to be as comprehensive as possible in synthesizing the different data sources (e.g., we include both individual and aggregate reports) while also being mindful of the information provided by our review of the relative strengths and weaknesses those data sets and agency reports in the estimation process. Ultimately, we settled on a two-stage duplicate case check estimate that combines both aggregate and individual data sources for known victims. For unique at-risk individuals, we again use the combined case record and aggregate agency report—with the duplicate case checks—to arrive at a "best" estimated count. We omit the Juvenile Justice risk assessment cases due to the variability in criteria for identifying risk, however.

What are the characteristics of human trafficking victims in Ohio?

- Known victims accounted for 32.9% of the sample.
- The majority of individuals were identified as sex trafficking victims (86.8%).
- The average age of victims when they were identified ranged from 12- to 30-years-old, with a majority of victims identified as minors (85.5%) in this sample.
- Most of the victims were female (82.6%) and many victims were classified as White (57.6%) followed by Black (35.4%), and Multiracial (6.4%).
- Approximately 92% of the sample was classified as being non-Hispanic/Latino.
- Percentage of victim nationality and citizenship were dependent on the data source.

- Finally, there were several vulnerability factors indicated in some of the data including having a history of justice system involvement (n = 301), running away (n = 89), being placed with foster care or child protective services (n = 211), and homelessness (n = 54).

Figure 1. Summary of Known Victims or At-Risk Individuals for Human Trafficking in Ohio, 2014-2016^
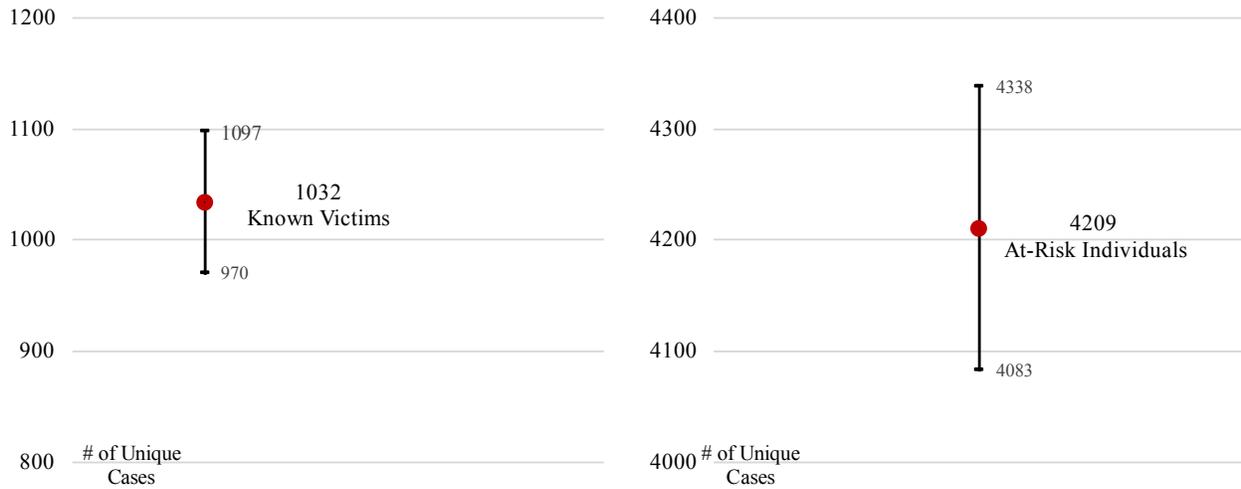
^A small portion of individuals were identified in 2013, 2017, or 2018.

Lessons Learned

The study was the first comprehensive cataloging of known and at-risk victims of human trafficking based on existing systems that collect data on human trafficking in Ohio. We identified two key issues that we present as "lessons learned" from conducting this study.

Issue 1: **Systems are not set up to collect information on trafficking victims in ways that are optimized for comprehensively understanding the problem and, when they are, the data infrastructure often precludes sharing, integration, or comparison with other systems.**

Issue 2: **A separate complicating issue is that a lot of systems are likely missing victims.**

In sum, researchers have attributed difficulties in calculating reliable prevalence estimates to a variety of issues including a lack of uniform definitions, missing or poorly gathered data, lack of reporting, reporting bias, missing identifiers to combine data sources, absence of data sharing and interagency cooperation, and lack of financial/technical assistance that might facilitate standardized data collection (see Banks & Kyckelhahn, 2011; Clawson, Layne, & Small, 2006; Farrell, McDevitt, & Fahy, 2008; Goździak & Bump, 2008; Kelly, 2005; Logan, Walker, & Hunt, 2009). This study was able to handle some of these concerns while others still hold. Information was obtained from 12 agencies across the state of Ohio in total, spanning various child welfare agencies, service providers, legal agencies, and law enforcement sources. In that sense, the overall coverage of potential known victims and at-risk individuals was strong. However, the information coverage or details shared varied considerably across sources which likely affected the estimated counts of human trafficking presented here. This

informs some recommendations for state and local agencies in Ohio that are concerned with the human trafficking problem.

Key Lessons Learned

Lesson 1: Ohio has continued to expand knowledge on the scope of human trafficking in the state; this study identified 1,032 known victims and 4,209 at-risk individuals based on a number of data sources.

Lesson 2: Existing systems are not currently set up for comprehensive data sharing across agencies or with researchers.

Lesson 3: Even when data are collected from existing agencies, it can be difficult to compare and integrate findings when different types and levels of detail are gathered (e.g., individual-level details with identifiers compared to aggregate reports).

Lesson 4: Based on the available information on human trafficking in Ohio that can be used for research purposes, these estimates are likely very conservative relative to the true number of victims.

Lesson 5: As the first "cataloging" of existing record systems in Ohio coupled with publicly available media accounts, this study provided a comprehensive overview of the number of potential victims in Ohio and the type of information that is—and is not—available.

Recommendations

Moving forward, several potential strategies may mitigate the measurement and estimation challenges outlined in this report and, in turn, provide relevant insight for effective policy and practice around this important problem. We propose five concrete steps that might be taken to further the understanding of human trafficking in the state of Ohio:

1. First, we recommend the development of a uniform reporting system for agencies serving vulnerable populations to track trafficking cases and risk factors. Prior to implementing a universal system funding would need to be prioritized to (1) develop a comprehensive understanding of how agencies are already funding and identifying gaps in their own systems, (2) form a committee to create a common trafficking definition for the purpose of this reporting system, (3) create a concatenation system that stakeholders agree on to protect client confidentiality, and (4) use incentives that would be beneficial to agencies for their participation in collecting this level of information. It is important that this initiative is created as an ongoing system to better identify and support victims. Without sustained efforts to maintain a reporting system, a true prevalence estimate of trafficking victims identified by agencies in Ohio will not be possible.

2. Second, as part of this process, agencies would need to feel secure about providing data to such a repository. To address this concern, we recommend the use of a concatenation system where agencies submit encoded identifiers. For example, details from a victim's identifiers

(Name: Jane Doe; Date of Birth: 01/01/1990; Social Security Number: 123-45-6789) could be scrambled and recoded (e.g., 19J01D01678990) to protect anonymity. This does not need to be a completely centralized system. That is, different agencies may still vary in the information that is collected, but will use a common set of items that allow for data integration. With some relatively minor changes we can improve our current systems. For example, as described in this study, agencies can begin measuring "core items" such as a history of child sexual abuse, chronic runaway behavior, homelessness, foster care, and juvenile court involvement.

3. Third, agencies and researchers should prioritize the collection of sociodemographic information including race, ethnicity, and foreign national status. The results of the study highlight the groups that are currently better identified (e.g., domestic minor sex trafficking victims). The characteristics and vulnerabilities of victims are only known to the extent of our current identification systems and victim help-seeking behavior. Comprehensive coverage of these variables could illuminate how trafficking risk and experiences vary by sociodemographic characteristics. Human trafficking victims are particularly hard to identify because they rarely self-identify as a victim while being trafficked. Relatedly, the findings in this study emphasize the importance of working towards identifying individuals *not* reached by systems—individuals who could have different experiences than those eventually identified by formal systems.

4. Fourth, we recommend the integration of strategies that researchers have used to measure other hard-to-reach or hidden populations. For example, using behavioral questions in screening methods has advanced research on the prevalence of sexual assault and could be used in screening tools. Implementing these assessment tools—and learning from other research with hidden populations—could strengthen many aspects of current human trafficking research, policy, and practice.

5. Fifth, when developing a system for uniform reporting, future criminal justice and social service research could benefit from drawing on epidemiological methods to estimate prevalence. Human trafficking is a criminal justice, human rights, and public health problem and our understanding of trafficking would advance tremendously through using public health research frameworks and methodologies to estimate prevalence. This can be accomplished, in part, through developing information sharing systems discussed above to account for similar information and duplicate cases. Scholars have suggested specific approaches recently including the use of capture-mark-recapture techniques and respondent-driven sampling to estimate the prevalence of human trafficking (Rothman et al., 2017).

In conclusion, there are a number of practical applications to consider when interpreting and using the findings from this study. Given that these estimates are likely conservative due to the unknown and unidentified population of trafficking victims, what do these numbers mean for agencies in terms of providing services? These findings indicate an increased need for training for law enforcement and other service providers, especially those at the frontline who are likely to interact with potential trafficking victims. However, the more we train key stakeholders and agencies to identify trafficking victims, the greater the likelihood that we will find more individuals in need of services. For example, in the current study, a majority of victims were identified in higher population density, urban counties. That is, 80% of the identified cases came

from the most populated counties in the state. Still, training should also be prioritized in less densely populated areas to assist victims. Overall, the economic impact of these efforts needs to be considered so that agencies and first responders have the funding and resources to effectively respond to victims' needs. Additionally, the costs (e.g., money, resources, staff) of creating better systems to identify and respond to victims needs to be further explored for sex and labor trafficking cases so agency efforts can be maximized.

Agencies across the state of Ohio have made tremendous progress toward measuring the prevalence of human trafficking by collecting and assessing available record information on victims. Despite challenges and limitations in gathering and integrating multiple data sources, the purpose of this study was to move beyond projections alone and root prevalence estimates of known and at-risk individuals in existing records. The hope is that the results from this study can be used to provide even more precise estimates in the future by strengthening reporting systems across agencies in Ohio. We further recommend that the state continues to prioritize funding for intervention, policy, and research efforts to position Ohio as a national leader in its response to human trafficking.

Summary of Recommendations

Embedded within each of the following recommendations is the inherent need to prioritize funding for building human trafficking knowledge and research capacity within agencies across the state:

Recommendation 1: Create a uniform reporting system for Ohio including "core items" to measure related to human trafficking victimization.

Recommendation 2: Use concatenation methods in reporting system to protect individual identities, link across agencies, and share data for research purposes.

Recommendation 3: Collect sociodemographic characteristics of victims and traffickers in a systematic manner in all agency reporting.

Recommendation 4: Learn from other research on hard-to-reach populations and integrate these strategies in future human trafficking research.

Recommendation 5: Move towards using epidemiological approaches to measure the prevalence of human trafficking.

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