Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

Exploitation, Violence, and Suicide Risk Among Child and Adolescent Survivors of Human Trafficking in the Greater Mekong Subregion

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IMPORTANCE: Human trafficking and exploitation of children have profound health consequences. To our knowledge, this study represents the largest survey on the health of child and adolescent survivors of human trafficking.

OBJECTIVE: To describe experiences of abuse and exploitation, mental health outcomes, and suicidal behavior among children and adolescents in posttrafficking services. We also examine how exposures to violence, exploitation, and abuse affect the mental health and suicidal behavior of trafficked children.

DESIGN, SETTING, AND PARTICIPANTS: A survey was conducted with 387 children and adolescents aged 10 to 17 years in posttrafficking services in Cambodia, Thailand, or Vietnam, which along with Laos, Myanmar, and Yunnan Province, China, compose the Greater Mekong Subregion. Participants were interviewed within 2 weeks of entering services from October 2011 through May 2013.

MAIN OUTCOMES AND MEASURES: Depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, suicidal ideation, self-injury, and suicide attempts.

RESULTS: Among the 387 children and adolescent study participants, most (82%) were female. Twelve percent had tried to harm or kill themselves in the month before the interview. Fifty-six percent screened positive for depression, 33% for an anxiety disorder, and 26% for posttraumatic stress disorder. Abuse at home was reported by 20%. Physical violence while trafficked was reported by 41% of boys and 19% of girls. Twenty-three percent of girls and 1 boy reported sexual violence. Mental health symptoms were strongly associated with recent self-harm and suicide attempts. Severe physical violence was associated with depression (adjusted odds ratio [AOR], 3.55; 95% CI, 1.64-7.71), anxiety (AOR, 2.13; 95% CI, 1.12-4.05), and suicidal ideation (AOR, 3.68; 95% CI, 1.77-7.67). Sexual violence while trafficked was associated with depression (AOR, 2.27; 95% CI, 1.22-4.23) and suicidal ideation (AOR, 3.43; 95% CI, 1.80-6.54).

CONCLUSIONS AND RELEVANCE: Children and adolescents in posttrafficking care showed high symptom levels of depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder, which are strongly associated with self-harm or suicidal behaviors. Mental health screening and reintegration risk assessments are critical components of posttrafficking services, especially in planning for family reunification and other social integration options.

Journal:

JAMA Pediatrics
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