Differentiating familial sex trafficking from human trafficking: A systematic review of terminology to inform continuity of care

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Abstract

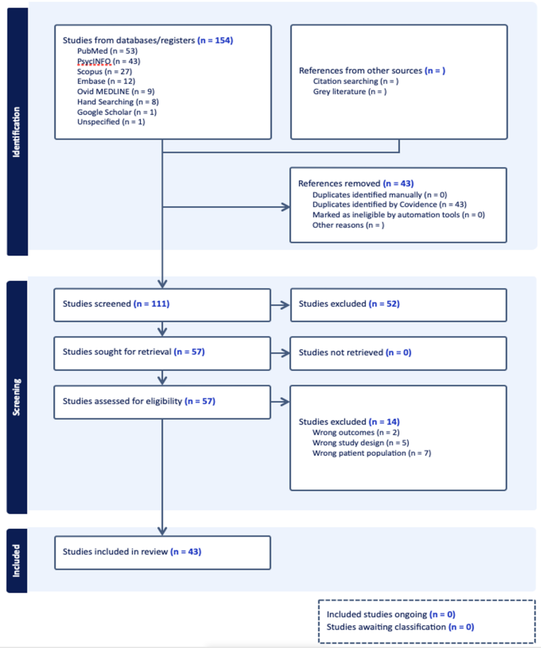
Background: Familial sex trafficking is a mounting public health crisis. Literature covering this topic describes familial sex trafficking in a number of ways, using multiple terms or phrases to identify this type of trafficking.
Purpose: To address inconsistencies in terminology that lead to an unclear operational definition, confusion about reporting guidelines, and an impact on the continuity of care for victims
Methods: We conducted a systematic analysis to clarify concepts specific to familial trafficking and, more specifically, familial sex trafficking, and propose operational definitions for both.
Results: This systematic review supports the need for operational definitions for this population to facilitate prevention initiatives, policy change, advocacy in healthcare costs, and more effective overall treatment.
Conclusion and Discussion: The interchangeable terms of HT, labor trafficking, and familial sex trafficking are masking the outcomes of robust data in the research literature due to the lack of consistency and clarity. Based on this review, we propose definitions for FT and FST.

Introduction

Human trafficking (HT) is a considerable public health issue in the United States. HT broadly encompasses crimes of forced labor and/or sex acts (Fraley & Subedi, 2022). Sex trafficking pertains specifically to crimes of sexual exploitation by fraud, force, or coercion (Fraley & Subedi, 2022). While anyone can be trafficked, many victims are young girls who are often overlooked by society and are at higher risk factors for sex trafficking (Edwards et al., 2024; Fraley & Subedi, 2022). Adding to the complexity of this sub-population is when a family member is the trafficker, otherwise known as FT (Edwards et al., 2024). The definitions surrounding HT, sex trafficking, and FT are complex and, at times, confusing (Fraley & Subedi, 2022). This article highlights inconsistencies in the terminology related to familial sex trafficking (FST) by utilizing a data-informed approach to offer direction for future research and practice. While the prevalence of HT is difficult to measure, healthcare providers, including counselors, social workers, nurses, and doctors, are likely to interact with young victims of FT in their work (Fraley & Subedi, 2022). Differentiating between FT from sex and HT is crucial for health care providers to more appropriately provide relevant care and resources to victims of these crimes (Brannock et. al., 2024). Across these historical shifts, the meaning of "trafficking" has remained fluid, shaped by evolving political, economic, and moral priorities (Dahlstrom, 2020). This definitional instability underscores the need to articulate a clear, contemporary working definition—one that distinguishes among forms of exploitation and provides conceptual precision for identification, research, and clinical intervention in the present context.

Current Research Statistics

Although contemporary terminology did not exist prior to 2000, HT has persisted across history in the form of buying, selling, and coercing individuals into slavery, servitude, and forced prostitution. Although initially focused on prostitution, "trafficking" was increasingly applied to drugs and arms, reflecting broader political, moral, and migration concerns (Amar, 2018; Dahlstrom, 2020; Hetherington & Laite, 2021; Musto, 2009; Schrover, 2015; Spencer & Broad, 2012). The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) provides a broad definition of HT that clarifies the key elements of action (e.g., recruitment or harboring), means (e.g., force, fraud, or coercion), and purpose (e.g., involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, slavery, or commercial sex acts) (TVPA, 2000). FST is a severe form of HT and falls under the TVPA's definitions of actions, means, and purpose, which allows this form of trafficking to fall under the federal legal framework. Currently, there are multiple terms used to describe this type of abuse, including FST, family-controlled sex trafficking, family-facilitated sex trafficking, domestic sex trafficking (also used as a reference for commercial trafficking), or intrafamilial sex trafficking. Indeterminate of the name by which it is called, the definition most often refers to a family member as the victim-survivor's trafficker selling the victim-survivor to a third party for goods or services (United States Department of State, 2021).



Number of Times a Term Was Used		
Terminology	f	%
Familial sex trafficking	402	47.23
Familial trafficking	319	37.48
Family-controlled trafficking	96	11.28
Domestic Minor Familial Sex Trafficking	14	1.64
Human trafficking by families	10	1.17
Intrafamilial sex trafficking	3	0.35
Family facilitated trafficking	2	0.23
Family-involved sex trafficking of minors	2	0.23
Family-based inter-generational trafficking of youth	2	0.23
Family-Facilitated Juvenile Sex Trafficking	1	0.11
Familial Commercial Sexual Exploitation	0	0
Total	851	

Methods

A systematic review was selected as the methodology to address the aim of this study. Systematic reviews are methodologically rigorous studies that form the reference standard for summarizing evidence in a specific area. This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) (Page et al., 2021). This review addressed the question: "What are the terms used for FST among professionals working in this continuum of care?" A qualitative content analysis to identify terminology in the articles included in the review.

Results

Data extraction identified the frequency of terminology used in FST (N=851). Based on the extraction, three terms appeared more frequently than the other eight terms, accounting for 96% of the terminology. FST (n=402; 47%) was the most common, while FT (n=319; 37%) appeared second most frequently, and family-controlled trafficking (n=96; 11%) was the third most used term. The data indicate a strong focus, with 95% of the articles using this terminology.

As a result of this systematic analysis, this author team proposes this definition of Familial Trafficking (FT): *a form of human trafficking when the exploiter/trafficker is familial as defined by when a parent, guardian, or other trusted family member (such as a sibling, aunt, uncle, grandparent, guardian, adopted parent, fictive kin, etc.) exploits a child for sex or labor in exchange for something of value.*

To clarify FST as *a distinct subpopulation within FT, the team proposes defining FST as: a form of familial trafficking in which a family member - such as a biological or foster parent, guardian, sibling, grandparent, or other recognized relative or fictive kin) enables, recruits, provides, harbors, transports, or otherwise facilitates the sexual exploitation of another family member*. In these cases, remuneration or something of value is exchanged, resulting in financial, material, social, or personal benefit to the offending family member. Such benefits may include money, drugs, shelter, goods, debt repayment, favors, or other tangible or intangible gains.

Discussion and Implications

FST is often misunderstood because of its complex dynamics and the difficulty of detecting, identifying, and reporting it, given the familial bond and, often, family code that prevent disclosure (Verhoeven et al., 2013). In fact, oftentimes the challenges of detecting cases of familial sex trafficking due to medical personnel, child protection agencies, or law enforcement agencies' lack of knowledge and tools necessary to detect familial sex trafficking can cause familial sex trafficking to be miscategorized as child sexual abuse or neglect, carrying less penalty than trafficking cases in prosecution (Sprang et al., 2018). This systematic review has profound clinical and practice implications for supporting survivors of FT and FST. The results of this review imply that scholars, healthcare providers, clinical practitioners, legal and criminal justice professionals, and researchers must clearly distinguish between trafficking, HT, and FT, along with specific subpopulations (labor and sex), for effective treatment. To better serve, assist, and treat survivors of HT, professionals must understand the unique variables that affect treatment within each HT subgroup

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