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THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEM IN THE PREVENTION AND EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF CHILD TRAFFICKING IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Marija Tasić*, Tanja Kesić, Darko Marinković

University of Criminal Investigation and Police Studies, Belgrade, Serbia

ORCID iDs: Marija Tasić	 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3755-4854
Tanja Kesić	 https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9473-4379
Darko Marinković	 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7833-7653

Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the role of the social welfare system in the prevention and early identification of child trafficking, based on the premise that children who are users of social welfare services are at an increased risk of victimisation. The study employs an analytical approach grounded in a systematic analysis of socio-economic and family factors whose presence has been empirically confirmed in cases of human trafficking, while simultaneously considering the adequacy of the indicator list for the preliminary identification of child victims used within the social welfare system in the Republic of Serbia. Conceptual analysis of the list shows that the indicators are empirically grounded and largely adapted to the phenomenon of human trafficking, enabling the recognition of different types of traffickers, recruitment methods and forms of child exploitation. One of the key shortcomings identified is the absence of indicators related to children's mental health, as well as those pointing to their recruitment and exploitation in online environments.

Key words: child trafficking, social welfare system, prevention and early identification, indicators, Republic of Serbia.

УЛОГА СИСТЕМА СОЦИЈАЛНЕ ЗАШТИТЕ У ПРЕВЕНЦИЈИ И РАНОЈ ИДЕНТИФИКАЦИЈИ ТРГОВИНЕ ДЕЦОМ У РЕПУБЛИЦИ СРБИЈИ

Апстракт

Циљ рада је истраживање улоге система социјалне заштите у превенцији и раној идентификацији трговине децом, на основу полазишта да су деца која су корисници услуга социјалне заштите у повећаном ризику од виктимизације. У раду се примењује аналитички приступ заснован на систематској анализи социо-

* Corresponding author: Marija Tasić, University of Criminal Investigation and Police Studies, Cara Dušana Street 196, 11080 Belgrade, Serbia, marija.tasic@kpu.edu.rs

економских и породичних фактора чија је присутност емпиријски потврђена у случајевима трговине људима, уз истовремено разматрање адекватности листе индикатора за прелиминарну идентификацију деце жртава која се примењује у систему социјалне заштите у Републици Србији. Концептуална анализа листе показује да су индикатори емпиријски утемељени и у значајној мери прилагођени феномену трговине људима, што омогућава препознавање различитих типова трговаца, метода регрутације и облика експлоатације деце. Као један од кључних недостатака издваја се изостанак индикатора везаних за ментално здравље деце, као и оних који указују на њихову регрутацију и експлоатацију у онлајн окружењу.

Кључне речи: трговина децом, систем социјалне заштите, превенција и рано препознавање, индикатори, Република Србија.

INTRODUCTION

Child trafficking represents a serious violation of children's rights, stemming from their structural vulnerability and limited capacity to protect themselves from exploitative relationships and abuse of power. It is a phenomenon studied across multiple scientific disciplines, such as law, criminology, and sociology. Given that children, as a particularly vulnerable social group, are affected by this phenomenon and that their protection has significant implications for public safety, child trafficking has also become a subject of research in police, criminological, and security sciences (Milojević et al., 2025). All relevant international instruments governing the field of human trafficking, such as the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (the so-called 'Palermo Protocol') and the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, recognise children as a distinct and particularly vulnerable category of victims. In these instruments, a child is defined as any person under the age of 18.

The Republic of Serbia, as a signatory to the aforementioned international instruments, provides in its national legislation for a special protection regime applicable to persons under the age of 18. However, within the domestic legal framework, the term 'child' is not used for this category; instead, the term 'juveniles' is employed. Human trafficking is considered to occur if any of the prescribed actions are carried out against juveniles (recruitment, transportation, transfer, delivery, sale, purchase, acting as intermediary in sale, hiding or holding another person), with intent of their exploitation. Possible forms of exploitation include: prostitution, use for pornographic purposes and other forms of sexual exploitation, labour exploitation, forced labour, committing criminal offences, begging, establishing a relationship of slavery or similar, removal of organs or body parts, as well as use in armed conflicts (Criminal Code, 2005, Art. 388, para. 1). When the victim is a juvenile, the use of force, threats, or any other method of perpetration is not required, and the statutory penalty for this offence ranges from three to twelve years of imprisonment (Art. 388, para. 2). If

such methods are employed, the perpetrator is subject to a stricter punishment of imprisonment for at least five years (Art. 388, para. 3).

The aggravated form of the offence is prescribed when, as a result of the act referred to in paragraph 1, the victim sustains serious bodily injury. The legislator has stipulated that the offender shall be punished by imprisonment of at least five years when the offence is committed against a juvenile using force, threats, or any other methods of perpetration, and this results in serious bodily injury (Art. 388, para. 4). It is illogical, however, that the legislator has prescribed the same punishment for the qualified form of the offence even when the juvenile victim does not suffer serious bodily injury. Furthermore, even with this legal basis for punishment, the legislator did not include cases in which no force, threats, or other listed methods of perpetration were used, and the victim was a juvenile (Žarković & Tasić, 2020).

The most serious aggravating circumstances include the death of the victim, habitual engagement in human trafficking, and the commission of the offence by a group or an organised criminal group (Art. 388, paras. 5-7). Finally, criminal liability is also established for service users, defined as persons who knew or could have known that someone was a victim of human trafficking, and who exploited their position or enabled another person to exploit that position for the purpose of exploitation (Art. 388, para. 8). An aggravated form of this offence exists in cases where the perpetrator knew or could have known that the victim was a juvenile (Art. 388, para. 9).

The criminalisation of child trafficking within the framework of existing legislation represents a significant step in combating this phenomenon. However, for the development of effective prevention mechanisms, human trafficking should be approached as a complex social phenomenon rather than solely as a criminal offence. This approach entails directing the focus toward the factors that render children vulnerable to trafficking in human beings, as well as developing tools that enable their early identification, while ensuring the active involvement of all stakeholders who come into contact with such children.

The scientific literature consistently recognises socio-economic conditions and the family environment as key factors contributing to children's vulnerability to trafficking. Children born and raised in poverty, lacking the means to meet basic needs, and with limited access to education may be at greater risk of being recruited and involved in human trafficking (Amponsah et al., 2024; Reed et al., 2019; Reid & Piquero, 2014a). Family factors, such as dysfunctional families, neglect, abuse, and lack of parental supervision, further increase the risk of victimisation. Children living in dysfunctional families characterised by the presence of violence, substance abuse, or parental mental health issues may be particularly vulnerable in the context of human trafficking (De Vries et al., 2025). In families where one or both parents have drug or alcohol problems, the risk of children

experiencing abuse and neglect is heightened (Reid & Piquero, 2014a). Exposure to domestic violence not only increases the risk of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse but also contributes to the development of emotional and behavioural problems in children, making them more susceptible to exploitation (Holt et al., 2008). Children and adolescents facing such difficulties often resort to drug use, and the development of addiction further increases their vulnerability to victimisation and indirectly, the likelihood of involvement with the juvenile justice system (Reid & Piquero, 2014b). Such experiences often result in frequent running away from home and engagement with the social welfare system, including removal from the biological family and placement in foster care, which further increases their vulnerability (Prakash et al., 2024). Temporary placement of children who cannot live in their biological families, either due to abandonment or removal as a result of neglect and abuse, may represent an additional risk factor (Dunnigan & Fusco, 2024). Children often run away from such placements or are exposed to the risk of being recruited by traffickers during the time they spend outside these facilities.

Given that risk factors characteristic of human trafficking largely overlap with those observed among children receiving social welfare services, the social welfare system plays a key role in the preliminary identification of cases of human trafficking (Pate et al., 2021). Accordingly, this study adopts an analytical approach to assess the role of the social welfare system and evaluate the adequacy of the current indicator list used for the preliminary identification of child victims of human trafficking in the Republic of Serbia.

THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL WELFARE SYSTEM IN THE PREVENTION AND EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF CHILD TRAFFICKING IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Social welfare services encompass various activities aimed at providing support and assistance to individuals and families in overcoming social and life difficulties, as well as creating conditions to meet basic needs (Law on social protection, 2011, Art. 4). Social protection is implemented through the work of social welfare institutions, which play a significant role in recognising cases of human trafficking. In the Republic of Serbia, the Center for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking (hereinafter: the Center), a specialised social welfare institution, conducts the formal identification of human trafficking victims and coordinates their protection. The Center assesses general and specific indicators of human trafficking in individual cases and formally issues a finding and opinion determining whether a person is a victim of human trafficking (ASTRA, 2022).

The statistical reports of the Center show that, in the period from 2021 to 2025, a total of 318 victims of human trafficking were formally identified, of whom 149 were children (47%), including 111 girls and 38 boys. Given that girls account for 75% of the identified child victims, it may be concluded that child trafficking contains a component of gender-based violence. The predominant forms of child exploitation include sexual exploitation (30%), forced begging (24%), forced marriage (14%), forced commission of criminal offences (11%), and labour exploitation (8%).

Over the past five years, the social welfare system has become an increasingly significant source of reports of suspected human trafficking, alongside the police and non-governmental organisations (Table 1). The number of reports submitted by the social welfare system has risen particularly since 2021, reflecting substantial efforts invested in the training of social workers who have completed programmes on early identification and the provision of support to victims of human trafficking. A proportion of submitted reports led to the formal identification of victims of human trafficking by the Center, with the percentage of identified victims steadily rising from 14% in 2023 to 21% in 2024 and 28% in 2025 (Center for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking, 2021–2025).

Table 1. Number of reports of suspected human trafficking submitted to the Centre by the social welfare system from 2021 to 2025

Year	Total number of reports of suspected human trafficking	Reports from the social welfare system
2021	127	22
2022	138	28
2023	168	43
2024	184	32
2025	240	28

Source: Center for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking, 2021–2025

However, despite the fact that the number of reports from the social welfare system has been increasing year by year, the early identification of victims within this system remains a significant challenge. Recognising cases of child trafficking is complicated by the fact that children often do not understand that they have been exploited, or fail to recognise their experiences as harmful (Titchen et al., 2025). Even when children have some awareness of their exploitation, difficulties frequently arise in disclosing such experiences, requiring specialised training and sensitivity on the part of social workers.

Social workers face challenges in identifying various risk factors and forms of child exploitation. In order to overcome difficulties in identifying children at increased risk of recruitment, as well as those already involved in trafficking, standardised indicator lists have been developed for

professionals within the social welfare system (Starseed et al., 2025). In the Republic of Serbia, two such lists have been created, one containing indicators adapted for the preliminary identification of adult victims, and the other listing indicators specifically tailored to children (Table 2). Based on their relevance in assessing the risk of victimisation, the indicators are classified into three groups: (1) contextual indicators - present in most human trafficking victims but also common among other social welfare users; (2) non-specific indicators - more frequently observed in human trafficking victims than in other users, but relevant only to a subset of victims; and (3) specific indicators - present in the majority of human trafficking victims and relatively rare among other users.

Table 2. List of indicators for the preliminary identification of child victims of human trafficking within the social welfare system

MATERIAL SITUATION	
1. The income of family members is controlled by someone outside the family who is not the child's legal guardian	3
2. The child's parents have a large debt	2
3. The child/family has unexplained sources of income	1
4. The child lacks toys and other common personal items	1
CHILD WORK ENGAGEMENT	
5. The child is engaged by a third party to work on the street (selling various items, begging, cleaning car windows, etc.) or otherwise earns/benefits a third party	3
6. A child under 15 years of age is employed or engaged in work, or there is an intention to employ/engage the child in work	3
7. A child aged 15 or older is illegally employed/engaged in hazardous work, or exploited through the worst forms of child labour	3
8. The child is engaged by parents to work on the street (selling various items, begging, cleaning car windows, etc.) or otherwise earns/benefits the parents	2
9. Parents, guardians, or caregivers require the child to provide certain financial means, and the child cannot return home if this is not provided	2
10. A child aged 15 or older is engaged in work but does not receive remuneration, or the remuneration is inadequate relative to the work performed	2
11. A child aged 15 or older lacks sufficient information about the employer and working conditions	2
12. A child aged 15 or older works in sectors where there is an increased risk of human trafficking	1
CONTROL AND DECEPTION	
13. The child has had/had restricted freedom of movement (presence of physical barriers, guards, constant supervision by another person, etc.).	3
14. The child is subjected to blackmail and/or intimidation (threats to expose that the child provides sexual services, committed a criminal act, threats to the child's family, etc.)	2

15. The child's social contacts are entirely controlled by others	2
16. The child is sent by parents or guardians to live in another family without informing the social welfare centre or without a reasonable explanation	2
17. The child opposes the parents' decision to place them in another family	2
18. A child over 16 years of age opposes a potential marriage or formation of an extramarital union	2
19. A child over 16 years of age does not know the future spouse or extramarital partner	2
20. The custom of 'buying a bride' involves amounts paid as a 'purchase fee' that exceed what is normally acceptable or symbolic	2
21. The family in which the child is placed, which is not the biological family, does not request any payment for the child's care, or the child's biological parents pay the family to take in the child	1
22. Others attempt to speak on behalf of the child in every situation	1
23. The child is threatened with violence or exposed to violence	1
24. The child accepts violence against themselves/is willing to defend the abuser	1
25. A person insufficiently known to the child, or a member of the extended family, promises the child a better life in another city/abroad	1
APPEARANCE AND CLOTHING	
26. Child has only clothing characteristic of different types of exploitation	1
27. Child has only certain items (mobile phone, taxi contacts, hotel room key ...)	2
28. Child wears clothing that can cover physical injuries	1
HOUSING CONDITIONS	
29. Room in which the child lives is significantly worse and more sparsely furnished compared to the rest of the apartment / usual items children use are missing	2
30. Child lives and works in the same place	2
31. Child frequently changes places of residence / relatively short stay in one place	2
32. Child lives with adults who are not related and unknown to the social work centre, nor are they the child's parents, guardians or foster carers	2
33. Child has no place to live	1
HEALTH STATUS	
34. The child has injuries that are characteristic of control measures	2
35. The child, according to their age, gives an illogical explanation for the cause of the injury / does not provide detailed information about how the injury occurred	1
36. The child is medically neglected and shows poor personal hygiene	1
37. There is a high degree of exhaustion, dehydration, and malnourishment of the child	1
38. The child reports being forced to use psychoactive substances	1
WAY OF COMMUNICATION	
39. The child does not speak freely, appears frightened	2
40. The child does not know the language spoken in the community where they live	1
41. It appears as if the child has been instructed on what to say	1
42. The child speaks in a manner and about content that may indicate experiences of exploitation	1

BEHAVIOUR	
43. The child refuses any cooperation with the social welfare centre, police, health services, or non-governmental organisations	2
44. The child over 16 years old provides incomprehensible or unacceptable explanations regarding the reasons for entering a marriage or informal union	2
45. The child expresses distrust towards state authorities	1
46. Pronounced anxiety, as if the child is checking whether someone is listening or watching, does not make eye contact / maintains significant physical distance	1
47. The child, relative to their age, makes decisions without sufficient information, impulsively	1
RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS/GUARDIANS	
48. The child is cared for by a person who has no proof of being the child's guardian	2
49. The child is unaccompanied	2
50. Larger groups of children who are not related travel with a small number of adults who do not have the necessary documents to care for the children	2
51. Sudden change in the parents' attitude towards the child (positive or negative)	2
52. The child is afraid of the parents/guardian/foster caregiver	2
53. The child is placed by the parents or guardian in accommodation or care with another family without notifying the social welfare centre or without a reasonable explanation	2
RISKS	
54. The child frequently changes sexual partners or is rumoured to provide sexual services.	2
55. The child frequently commits criminal acts (theft, possession of drugs, or sale, etc.)	2
56. The child has a significantly older boyfriend/girlfriend	2
57. The child often runs away from home	1
58. The child talks about a future luxurious life abroad or in another city without a clear plan, relying on friends and acquaintances.	1
59. The child does not attend school regularly	1
LIFE HISTORY AND COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE	
60. The child, relative to their age, speaks inconsistently and incoherently about their life; there are gaps in memory, and they provide contradictory or inaccurate statements	2
61. The child does not know the name of the place where they are, the address where they live or work, or other basic information about the community	2
62. The person does not speak the language of the community in which they live	1
PERSONAL DOCUMENTS	
63. A person unknown to the social welfare centre is trying to help the child obtain personal documents or assist in other legal matters	2
64. The child does not have control over their personal documents	2
65. The child possesses forged personal documents	2
66. An unlawful attempt to change the child's family-legal status has been observed, aimed at adoption or assuming guardianship of the child	2

Source: Center for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking, 2021

If there is a suspicion that a child using social welfare services is a victim of human trafficking, social workers are obliged to conduct an assessment based on a list containing 66 indicators (Office for Coordination of Activities in the Fight Against Human Trafficking, 2018). Indicators included in the assessment are evaluated across multiple domains, with each one assessed using a 1–3 rating scale. If any indicator in a domain is rated 3, or if the total score in a domain is 4 or higher, it is considered that there are strong indications of human trafficking. In such cases, it is necessary for the social workers conducting the assessment to contact the Center to ensure the victim is protected in the best possible way (Center for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking, 2021).

DISCUSSION

The development and implementation of a specialised indicator list, as a structured tool for assessing the risk of victimisation, represents a positive step in the early identification of children as possible victims of human trafficking in the Republic of Serbia. Based on an analysis of the list's content, it can be concluded that it is designed to encompass the assessment of a broad range of empirically grounded and relevant indicators across different domains. The list provides adequate opportunities for recognising various forms of exploitation, such as labour, sexual, and others, as well as different types of traffickers (parents, intimate partners, third parties).

Within the risk domain, indicators reflect both structural and individual vulnerability factors that make children more susceptible to recruitment in the context of human trafficking. For instance, early engagement in sexual activity, frequent changes in sexual partners, and substance abuse are empirically confirmed risk factors associated with child sex trafficking. In addition, a history of sexual abuse, as well as the involvement of the child's family members or friends in commercial sexual activities, should be recognised as strong risk factors. These factors should also be incorporated into the risk domain, as they may contribute to the desensitisation of children and increase their vulnerability to subsequent sexual victimisation (Furlong & Hinnant, 2024; Hurst, 2021; Twis et al., 2022). This domain should be also expanded to include additional indicators related to family risk factors, such as exposure to neglect and domestic violence, parental substance and alcohol abuse, parental history of mental illness, and similar circumstances.

Children's involvement in the juvenile justice system, due to frequent engagement in criminal activities, is justifiably included within the risk domain. In addition to delinquency related to drug possession and sale, it is important to examine the child's involvement in offences related to prostitution (Farrell & Reichert, 2017).

Indicators related to children's engagement in labour have been included within a separate domain, which is beneficial, as they differ from indicators associated with other forms of exploitation, particularly sexual exploitation, and therefore require a specific approach in the risk assessment process. As a significant indicator in this domain, children's work on the street is recognised, which can include performing various activities such as selling items on the street, cleaning windows, performing different shows, as well as begging. The indicators are designed to clearly differentiate between parents and third parties as possible traffickers. Since a child's financial contribution to the family does not always constitute human trafficking, an additional indicator has been established when children are required to provide certain financial resources under the implication that they will otherwise be unable to return home. If a child's work is controlled by a third party who gains income or other benefits from it, there is a likelihood of organised child trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation or coercion into begging/committing criminal offences.

The included indicators are adapted to the age of the children, in accordance with the applicable regulations prohibiting the establishment of an employment relationship with individuals under 15 years of age (Labor Law, 2005, Art. 24, Para. 1). Therefore, the employment or engagement of such individuals constitutes a strong indicator of labour exploitation, while even the intent to employ or engage them clearly indicates a risk of human trafficking. For children aged 15 to 18, special conditions are prescribed for establishing employment - such work must not endanger their health, morals, or education, and must not be prohibited by law. Additionally, written consent from a parent, adoptive parent, or guardian is required, along with a medical certificate (Art. 25, Para. 1 and 2). If it is determined that children aged 15 and older are engaged in hazardous work, this constitutes a strong indicator of labour exploitation.

When such children are engaged in legally permitted work, the presence of indicators is assessed regarding whether they receive compensation for their labour, including the adequacy of the compensation in relation to the work performed, as well as whether they have sufficient information about the employer and the working conditions. This assessment should also include additional indicators, such as: the existence of debt to the employer or a third party, the formalisation of the employment relationship, the duration of the engagement, control over earned income, fulfilment of occupational safety and protection conditions, and the child's ability to terminate the employment relationship at will.

Finally, this domain also considers whether the child is employed in sectors with an elevated risk of human trafficking. Particular attention should be paid to service work, agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and domestic work, as these sectors accounted for the majority of identified

cases of labour exploitation in 2025 in the Republic of Serbia (ASTRA, 2025).

Within the domain of deception and control, the indicators included may signal a risk of illegal adoption and forced marriage. For example, moderate indicators may be present if a child is placed by a parent or guardian into another family without informing the social welfare centre, or if there is no reasonable justification for such placement, and the child objects to the decision. Even when families entrust their children to another family, believing it will provide them with financial stability and educational opportunities, children may still face welfare risks due to insufficient institutional oversight. If it is determined that the parents received any compensation for placing the child, this constitutes a significant indicator of human trafficking, in which the child is treated as an object of sale.

The following moderate indicators in this domain relate to situations of potential child exploitation through forced marriage. They concern individuals aged 16 to 18, as this age group may, in legally permitted cases, enter into marriage (Family Law, 2005, Art. 23, Para. 2). Social welfare centres play a crucial role in identifying victims within this population, as the court is obliged to obtain their opinion when deciding whether to grant permission for such marriages. However, a significant number of forced marriages are not officially registered with competent institutions, existing instead as informal unions, which further complicates their detection (Marković, 2021).

Risk assessment for individuals over the age of 16 is conducted based on indicators such as the child's opposition to a possible marriage or cohabitation, acquaintance with the prospective partner, and the presence of the custom of "bride buying." However, in practice, it is not straightforward to determine whether the consent was truly voluntary, as children often do not recognise their parents as traffickers (Torres & Villacampa, 2022). Even when children oppose the marriage, they may be unwilling to speak about their experience due to fear of potential criminalisation of their parents or other factual and legal consequences, including removal from the family and stigmatisation (Love et al., 2019). The child's perceived obligation to accept an imposed marriage may be strengthened by strong familial and community pressure (Đorđević & Gavrilović, 2017). Consequently, additional indicators often associated with child forced marriage should be considered, including belonging to certain religious or cultural communities where arranged marriages are commonly practiced (Aleksić, 2016). Strong indicators of child forced marriage may also include a significant age difference between the child and a prospective partner, the sudden withdrawal of the child from school, the disruption of their social ties, and physical isolation (Kazimirski et al., 2009; Swegman, 2016).

Indicators suggesting an increased risk of child sexual exploitation can be found across various domains. These include, among others: state-

ments from others that the child provides sexual services; use of violence, blackmail, or intimidation; presence of unexplained sources of income; restricted freedom of movement; frequent changes of residence; traveling in larger groups of children with unrelated adults; possession of clothing and items characteristic of sexual exploitation, sexualised behaviour, and more. Given that traffickers are often the victim's intimate partners, additional significant indicators include the child having a substantially older partner, living with unrelated adults, being socially isolated, accepting violence against themselves and defending the abuser, refusing any cooperation with competent authorities, and similar behaviours.

Strong indicators of sexual exploitation can be identified within the domain of the child's health status, including the presence of specific injuries, such as bruises, cuts, burns, scars, and other injuries, combined with the child's inability to explain how they occurred, as well as indicators of coercion into the use of psychoactive substances. Medical data indicating anogenital symptoms, such as genital pain, itching, abnormal bleeding, and pelvic pain, as well as a history of sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, or abortion, also require careful assessment (Varma et al., 2015). A limitation of this domain is that it does not include any indicators related to mental health, despite the fact that victims of sexual exploitation often exhibit symptoms such as depression, anxiety, generalised fear, shame, guilt, low self-esteem, self-harm, or suicidal thoughts (Gerassi et al., 2023).

Furthermore, there is a noticeable lack of indicators covering situations in which a child is recruited or exploited in digital environments. Human traffickers increasingly use the Internet and other digital technologies to establish and develop relationships with children for the purpose of sexual exploitation. In some cases, children are manipulated into sending photographs or videos in which they are unclothed or engaging in sexual activities, which traffickers then use as a means of control and coercion. In online environments, children may be sexually exploited through performing explicit acts in front of a camera, as well as through the distribution of material resulting from child sexual abuse (Ali et al., 2023). Therefore, it is necessary to include indicators that a child has been recruited and exhibits sexually risky behaviour on social media and online platforms. Potential indicators may include the following questions: Has the child used the Internet to post sexually explicit material? Has anyone photographed or filmed the child while unclothed or minimally clothed (e.g., in underwear) or while performing any sexual activity? Has the child established contact with unknown individuals online? Is there knowledge that such photographs or videos have been posted online, shared with others, or sold? (Charm, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Enhancing the capacity of the social welfare system for the early identification of vulnerable children can significantly contribute to the prevention of human trafficking and the protection of victims. Empirical research consistently confirms that children involved in the social protection system are at an increased risk of recruitment and exploitation in the context of human trafficking. In the Republic of Serbia, significant progress has been made in training social workers to conduct the preliminary identification of child victims of human trafficking and in developing and implementing an appropriate risk assessment tool. The current list of indicators applied within the social protection system is empirically grounded and largely adapted to the realities of child trafficking. The quality of the list is particularly highlighted by the fact that the indicators are not solely focused on identifying coercive recruitment and control methods, but also encompass subtler strategies, including emotional and economic coercion, as well as the social isolation of children. One of the key limitations of the list is the absence of indicators related to children's mental health and those reflecting their recruitment and exploitation in online environments. Moving forward, it is essential to conduct a systematic evaluation of the indicator list to determine its practical utility and the outcomes of conducted risk assessments.

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УЛОГА СИСТЕМА СОЦИЈАЛНЕ ЗАШТИТЕ У ПРЕВЕНЦИЈИ И РАНОЈ ИДЕНТИФИКАЦИЈИ ТРГОВИНЕ ДЕЦОМ У РЕПУБЛИЦИ СРБИЈИ

Марија Тасић, Тања Кесић, Дарко Маринковић

Криминалистичко-полицијски универзитет, Београд, Србија

Резиме

Трговина децом представља тешко кршење права детета, које произлази из њихове структурне рањивости и ограничене способности да се заштите од експлоативних односа и злоупотребе моћи. Ефикасна превенција овог феномена захтева разумевање фактора који повећавају рањивост деце, као и развој одговарајућих алата за њихову рану идентификацију. Имајући у виду да су фактори ризика карактеристични за трговину људима присутни код деце укључене у систем социјалне заштите, социјални радници се налазе у повољној позицији за препознавање могућих или актуелних случајева трговине децом. Ово потврђује и чињеница да значајан део пријава сумњи на трговину људима у Републици Србији потиче управо из система социјалне заштите.

У циљу унапређења капацитета система социјалне заштите за рано препознавање деце у ризику од виктимизације, развијена је специјализована листа индикатора. Концептуална анализа ове листе показује да је она емпиријски утемељена и значајно прилагођена реалности феномена трговине децом. Квалитет листе огледа се у томе што индикатори нису фокусирани само на препознавање насилних метода регрутовања и контроле, већ обухватају и суптилније методе, укључујући емоционалну и економску принуду и социјалну изолацију деце. Један од главних недостатака листе је то што нису укључени индикатори који се односе на ментално здравље деце, као ни они који указују на њихову регрутацију и злоупотребу у онлајн окружењу. У будућности, потребно је спровести систематску евалуацију листе индикатора како би се проценила њена практична корисност и исходи извршених процена ризика.