Improving Methods for Estimating Human Trafficking Scope

Governments, NGOs and intergovernmental organizations have yet to produce uncontested, reliable estimates on the scope of human trafficking. As discussed in the two previous chapters, the US Government has abandoned its past methods of estimating human trafficking scope and is in the process of improving these. The German Government produces no such estimates. The nature of human trafficking is clandestine and it is, therefore, hard to detect. Both the American and German Government posit that there is a high ‘dark,’ or unknown number of human trafficking victims and perpetrators. This is also true for the volume of profit made by human traffickers. The first step toward improving human trafficking estimates is to determine which available empirical data correlates closely with changes in human trafficking scope. A second step would then be to conceive a plausible mathematical relationship between known empirical data relating to human trafficking scope and the estimated scope of human trafficking. This chapter will contribute to taking the first step to improve human trafficking estimates.

This chapter puts forward a set of indicators, which could be used by national governments, NGOs and intergovernmental organizations to standardize the data categories on which human trafficking estimates are based. Currently, very few institutions have attempted to estimate the scope of human trafficking. Existing estimates are not comparable with one another because they rely on various methodologies. Even estimates made by the same source have not been comparable from year to year, due to changing methods for producing estimates. The indicators developed in Chapter Five have been derived from the components found in international anti human trafficking frameworks explored in Chapter One.

The indicators that will be proposed in this chapter were presented to a group of human trafficking experts and rated by these persons via an Internet platform. The indicators were rated for their impact on the scope of human trafficking. The experts cannot be named here. They were given the option of remaining anonymous in return for their participation in the Internet survey. All asked not to be identified publicly as a condition for their participation in the survey. However, the overwhelming majority made their identity known to the author. All participants of the survey work in the
field of anti human trafficking, either as policy advisors, service providers, researchers or with the media.

The human trafficking indicators which are proposed in this chapter (i.e. categories of empirical data that can feed into a mathematical relationship to estimate the scope of human trafficking) are intended to initiate a process. This process should work toward developing consensus among governments, NGOs and intergovernmental organizations as to what indicators should be used to universally estimate the scope of human trafficking.

Much deliberation surrounds the cleft between the detected scope of human trafficking and its estimated magnitude. In order to compensate for the lack of concrete information on the volume and ‘quality’ of human trafficking, governments, researchers, United Nations institutions and NGOs have attempted to estimate the scope of human trafficking. However, methods of estimating its scope are unsatisfactory and need to be improved in order to aid policy makers to better combat human trafficking. For example, existing estimates are questioned by leading anti human trafficking institutions like the Council of Europe:

“Do they number 120,000, 180,000, even 500,000? It is very difficult to know exactly how many people have been subjected to trafficking in Europe. Police forces, NGOs and international organizations all agree that the statistics are not accurate. On the other hand, two facts are quite clear to all: the first is that women and children are the main victims of this dreadful trade, and the second is that trafficking is constantly increasing.”

Estimates concerning the scope of human trafficking have the potential to give policy makers insights into the actual scope of a crime, which is extremely difficult to detect. Since the actual and detected scope of human trafficking is thought to differ greatly, reliable and comparable estimates on the actual scope could significantly increase the public will and with it the political will to invest in combating it. Antonio Maria Costa, executive director of the Vienna-based United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, underlined this point:

“Better data is needed to determine the magnitude of human trafficking and some countries are not taking the problem as seriously as they should be, the U.N.’s top anti-crime official said Tuesday. ‘We only see the tip of the iceberg, but we have not succeeded in pushing this iceberg out of the water,’ Antonio Maria Costa, executive director of the Vienna-based United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, said in an interview.”

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