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The Use of Public-Private-Partnerships to Fill Technological Voids in Countering Human Trafficking

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Technology evolves at a pace that facilitates the business model of human trafficking networks and hampers law enforcement and criminal justice professional's ability to interdict these networks. Human trafficking networks incorporate these new technologies as they come to market. Antiquated information systems, jurisdictional constraints and changing funding priorities severely restrict law enforcement's ability to investigate and interdict these crimes.

The use of taxpayer resources to ensure public safety is evolving with a set of complex rules for funding, procurement and policy constraints which must be understood as unique for each specific political jurisdiction. Since policy implementation is documented through the funding of government services, the local, state, and federal budgets allocation of taxpayer monies is the most clear and compelling evidence of changing public safety attitudes and needs. To add complexity to the process, Governors, District Attorneys, City Councils, County Board of Supervisors all can weigh in with additional constraints for funding streams, procurement processes and the implementation of law enforcement activities especially when the application of technology, AI and surveillance is involved.

This has provided a vacuum which is being filled by nonprofit and for-profit companies who are able to rapidly develop and field data collection, artificial intelligence, and information sharing technologies and processes to assist criminal justice professionals in a public-private-partnership model to identify, dismantle and prosecute these networks. This report identifies challenges and solutions law enforcement faces with technology and how a public-private partnership approach can yield improved outcomes in disrupting human trafficking networks.

BACKGROUND

The United States Department of Justice defines human trafficking as “a crime that involves exploiting a person for labor, services, or commercial sex” (Human Trafficking, 2022). Human trafficking is a complex issue that crosses numerous local state and federal agencies’ mandates. Therefore, combating the issue should come from collective efforts among various law enforcement agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and private companies.

The grant making agencies which fund these efforts include Department of Justice, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of State, Department of Labor, the United States Agency for International Development, and Department of Transportation (Federal Funding - United States Department of State, 2022).

Department of Justice (DOJ) provides resources to develop, expand, and strengthen programs for victims of human trafficking, such as comprehensive and specialized victim services, human trafficking task forces, training and technical assistance, and research.

For example, DOJ funded \$87 million to combat human trafficking, providing supportive services to victims and researching the causes of labor and sex trafficking (Department of Justice, 2022). Table 1. Provides a breakdown of the funding amounts per program area.

These grants, while having value on the restoration of the lives of victims, do little to prevent future trafficking victims from being recruited. This is because they are rooted in a philosophy that doesn’t consider the modern use of technology by human traffickers in the spotting, grooming, recruiting and victimization of victims. They are focused on managing the aftermath of a crime as opposed to preventing it.

BACKGROUND

FUNDING AMOUNT	PROGRAM
\$22 million	Develop, expand or strengthen victim service programs
\$22 million	Develop, expand or strengthen a multidisciplinary approach
\$15 million	Safe, stable housing and appropriate services to victims
\$8 million	Develop, expand or strengthen victim service programs for under 18 y/o
\$3 million	Training and technical assistance to service providers
\$2.6 million	Understand, prevent and respond to trafficking in persons in US
\$2 million	Improve responses to child and youth victims of trafficking-focus on statewide and tribal
\$2 million	Develop and enhance programs to provide direct services and diversion programs
\$2 million	Innovative strategies and models to support jurisdictions engaged in identifying victims
\$2 million	Develop, expand or strengthen victim service programs for underage victims
\$1 million	Support prevention and early intervention programs for girls who are at-risk
\$0.4 million	Improve ability to implement victim centered and trauma informed investigations

Table 1. Office of Victims of Crime Funding for Human Trafficking Grants

Use of Technology by Human Traffickers

While the Internet has provided much in the expansion of communication and knowledge it has also been used to provide access to a much larger pool of potential victims.

Specifically, the proliferation of social media and access to the internet through mobile devices provides ready access to these potential victims. Further, technology has allowed traffickers to recruit from a distance, never having to meet their victims in person but through intermediaries. This significantly reduces the risk to the trafficker. Another factor technology has facilitated is the cross jurisdictional nature of the crime. Tiphonie Critten, a United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Officer states, “The global nature of human trafficking and the abuse of technology makes it even more difficult for law enforcement authorities to tackle this crime” (The Role of Technology in Human Trafficking, 2022).

The UNODC identifies that human trafficking networks are quick to assimilate technology into their business models (The Role of Technology in Human Trafficking, 2022). According to Ms. Critten, “Traffickers are currently using technology to profile, recruit, control and exploit their victims as well as using the Internet, especially the dark web, to hide illegal materials stemming from trafficking and their real identities from investigators.” (The Role of Technology in Human Trafficking, 2022) Human traffickers are proven to be nimble in their adoption of technology to further their business objectives.

Social media also plays a major component in the progression of sex trafficking and has been utilized as a method to combat sex trafficking. As mentioned by Polaris, the Internet has large influence in shaping societal views and norms, and with sex trafficking there is no different. The text states, “social media has been used by traffickers to recruit victims, to proliferate their trafficking operations, and to control victims through restricting their social media access, impersonating the victim, or spreading lies and rumors online” (Polaris, 2022). Social media has been a tool in which predators seek out victims, thus beginning the progress of forced labor. Data shows that in the United States approximately 40% of sex trafficking victims are recruited online, making the Internet the most common place where victim recruitment takes place,” Alexandra Gelber, the Deputy Chief for Policy and Legislation at the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section of the U.S. Department of Justice (The Role of Technology in Human Trafficking, 2022).

Anne Reiner further expounds upon the issue of social media and its influence on sex trafficking by sharing data on sex trafficking cases that began on social media. According to the text, “A 2020 study by the Tech Transparency Project showed that between January 2013 and December 2019 over 300 cases of child exploitation went unnoticed by Facebook” (Reiner, 2022).

Use of Technology by Human Traffickers

This becomes problematic considering that social media can filter through user's conversations and interactions. Many have become outraged with social media's less aggressive approach in preventing sex trafficking. Some shared sentiments are, "It's easy to get rid of Trump off of Twitter, but they can't get child pornography off of Twitter and Snapchat," said Lycoming County Detective William Weber, the county's chief investigator of child abuse crimes" (Reiner, 2022). Social media platforms have enabled predators to identify their victims and are not being held accountable.

One social media platform which has seen a significant rise since the pandemic is OnlyFans. Through this social media app, users are allowed to pose explicit content and obtain payment for viewers to access. It has been stated by Catharine A. MacKinnon of New York Times that Only Fans have been like pimp work, in that it benefits financially from the exploitation of sex workers (MacKinnon, 2021). Furthermore, there is no guarantee that individuals are consenting to their sharing of content, not those depicted are adults. As referenced in the text, "There is no way to know whether pimps and traffickers are recruiting the unwary or vulnerable or desperate or coercing them offscreen and confiscating or skimming the proceeds, as is typical in the sex industry. OnlyFans take 20 percent of any pay, it's pimp's cut" (MacKinnon, 2021). Social media platforms like this continue to contribute to the occurrences of human trafficking.

Law Enforcement Challenges

According to the US Department of Justice, in 2016 there were over 17,500 law enforcement agencies in the United States. (National Sources of Law Enforcement Employment Data, 2022)

Under the US system of justice, each of these law enforcement agencies are constrained to jurisdictional boundaries. Generally, these jurisdictional boundaries are established by geography. While there may be some overlap in jurisdiction from federal or state agencies to local agencies, often these overlaps must be coordinated during investigations.

While the federal agencies have the broadest jurisdictions and the most financial resources, they are generally limited in capacity of personnel. The preponderance of the work against human trafficking is conducted by local authorities who have fewer resources and smaller jurisdictional boundaries.

Despite hundreds of millions of dollars being allocated to fighting human trafficking, government constraints have created limitations for success without the help of other organizations (Department of Justice, 2021). To combat human trafficking, federal governments have allocated millions of dollars in grants, as part of the federal government's national plan to combat human trafficking, the executive government not only increased funding expenditures but also emphasized prioritizing the allocation of funding resources through external partnerships (The White House, 2021).

The new plan has led to the result of the federal government's prioritization of collaboration with private and NGO, partnerships have become essential for effectively combating human trafficking. Under Priority Action 3.3. 3, The National Action Plan specifically addresses constraints such as privacy laws, security measures, and structural limitations that law enforcement agencies have due to advancements of technology; leading to needed partnerships with technology-focused organizations to lawfully obtain data. The data show that "enhanced collaborations have helped task forces obtain resources needed to support their work, and statewide task forces struggle more than local task forces with collaboration and service provision" (National Institute of Justice, 2022, Major Findings section).

Law Enforcement Challenges

“One of the critical strategic resources available to both law enforcement agencies and NGOs is digital intelligence (DI) technology” (Parker and Gambill, 2022). The use of information systems (IS) and DI provide a method for enhancing the collaboration of agencies cross jurisdictionally. IS and DI “include automated data extraction solutions that can help to obtain, preserve and analyze private and public social media data, activities, backups and other cloud-based content using a forensically sound and lawful process” (Parker and Gambill, 2022).

However, as identified in research from Baylor University and Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, “technologies exist to help law enforcement officers counter human trafficking, but the availability and use of the systems vary across and within departments” (Petter, Giddens and Fullilove, 2020). The researchers identified several factors that prevent adoption of technology by law enforcement. Key findings included:

- Lack of time with technology
- Lack of investment in technology
- Lack of support from collaborators
- Lack of integration with work process

Despite individual law enforcement officers desire to maximize technology in their human trafficking investigations, these officers are limited because of the limited resource caravan pathways available to them organizationally (Giddens, Petter and Fullilove, 2021).

Solutions

Because of these factors, the public-private partnership approach to countering human trafficking is paramount. The approach leverages the strengths and authorities of each constituent to maximize the movement toward a common goal. Law enforcement is incentivized to close cases quickly and accurately to maintain the public trust. NGOs are incentivized to collaborate because there is now an agent with the authorities to act under the criminal code. Private companies are incentivized because of underlying corporate philosophy and the growing importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR). The resourcing and resource caravans of law enforcement technology adoption and usage can be overcome through using the experts in the NGO and private business spaces.



There are numerous technologies available but significant technologies are DeliverFund's Platform of Analysis and Targeting of Human traffickers (P.A.T.H) and its component technology PATHFinder and Leo Technologies Verus tool.

P.A.T.H. is the largest human curated database of human trafficking information available to law enforcement. P.A.T.H. is Software as a Service provided to law enforcement. The platform is used to collect, record, store and visualize data related to human trafficking networks. There is no national database of human trafficking investigators which makes it difficult to coordinate investigations that cross jurisdictional boundaries. Because P.A.T.H. is criminal justice information systems (CJIS) compliant, the technology serves as a method to coordinate and deconflict investigations across jurisdictions. This provides the opportunity for additional data to be used as evidence in investigations and prosecutions.

PATHFinder is a tool that investigators use to identify potential human trafficking in commercial sex advertisements (CSA). BY collecting advertisements from multiple CSA sites, this tool provides a one-stop-shop for investigators. This alleviates the need to move between multiple tabs on a browser to correlate advertisements on multiple sites. PATHFinder also archives the advertisements with time stamps so in the event they are removed by a trafficker there is still a recording of the advertisement for use in investigations. Lastly this tool incorporates artificial intelligence, machine learning and computer visualization in a manner not available in other tools. As an example, PATHFinder can identify objects that appear in multiple advertisements which can assist investigators when trying to determine if there are multiple victims in a human trafficking network.

Leo Technologies Verus tool, similarly, makes use of large data sets to counter human trafficking. Verus is a United States (CONUS) cloud-based proprietary and automated analytics investigative software leveraging authorized inmate communications originating from correctional facilities' phone systems. Verus employs a unique architectural approach utilizing automated speech recognition indexing, unlike traditional transcription tools that use large vocabulary continuous speech recognition (LVCSR). This allows Verus to ingest, aggregate, process, and analyze these communications in near real-time and at a tremendous scale – the only cost-effective manner to monitor all the >100,000,000 annual law enforcement interactions.

It is a common misperception that human trafficking stops after arrest. Human Traffickers continue to manage their networks while incarcerated. Deliver Fund and Leo Technologies work together in conjunction with the appropriate authorities to address human trafficking conducted from incarcerated persons. Phone calls and other authorized inmate communications in jails and prisons are routinely recorded and subject to monitoring, with exceptions including communications to legal counsel and clergy. Verus is a cloud-based software installed on top of phone systems within correctional and detention facilities. It automatically downloads, analyzes, and transcribes all recorded calls from inmates and detainees, proactively flags them for review, and provides immediately actionable intelligence to investigators and correctional personnel. When combined with P.A.T.H. and PATHFinder, the combined tool suite provides significant insight into human trafficking that is not otherwise available.

This combination of technologies utilized under a public-private-partnership approach fills technology gaps experienced by law enforcement. The use of this approach drastically scales the ability of law enforcement to collect relevant evidence to be used in investigations and prosecution. Experience has shown this model drastically reduces the time law enforcement investigative cycles take from multiple weeks to hours. In a society where resources are finite and there is ever growing competition for those dollars creating efficiencies in the investigative cycle is fiscally sound policy and improves agency performance.

A CASE STUDY

During December 2020, A DeliverFund analyst was searching for advertisements indicative of human trafficking on CSA sites in Georgia. The DeliverFund analyst worked in partnership with a Leo Technologies Investigative Specialist to identify potential human trafficking be perpetrated by incarcerated persons in Georgia. The DeliverFund Analyst provided numbers indicative of human trafficking to Leo Investigative Specialist to determine if any of the numbers in CSA were contacted by incarcerated persons.

Because the outgoing call is to an advertisement with indicators of human trafficking and it is highly unlikely an incarcerated person would be able to actually meet the person in the advertisement, this elevated the suspicion index. During the intelligence gathering process, a number with indicators of human trafficking was identified as having been called by an incarcerated person.

The DeliverFund Analyst reviewed the included reports reference suspected human trafficking intelligence identified by Leo Investigative Specialist. The Leo Investigative Specialist identified several phone calls made by inmate to the identified phone number. The Leo Investigative Specialist was able to identify the caller by the pin number used to access the phone system

During the phone calls, the CALLER and the RECEIVER discussed escorting, prostitution and the CALLER told the RECEIVER he is back to "trapping." The CALLER talks to RECEIVER about rejoining him and his girls when released from prison. Because of the ability to look back in time at phone calls and advertisement, it was determined that the CALLER had made several calls to the RECEIVER between May and December 2020.

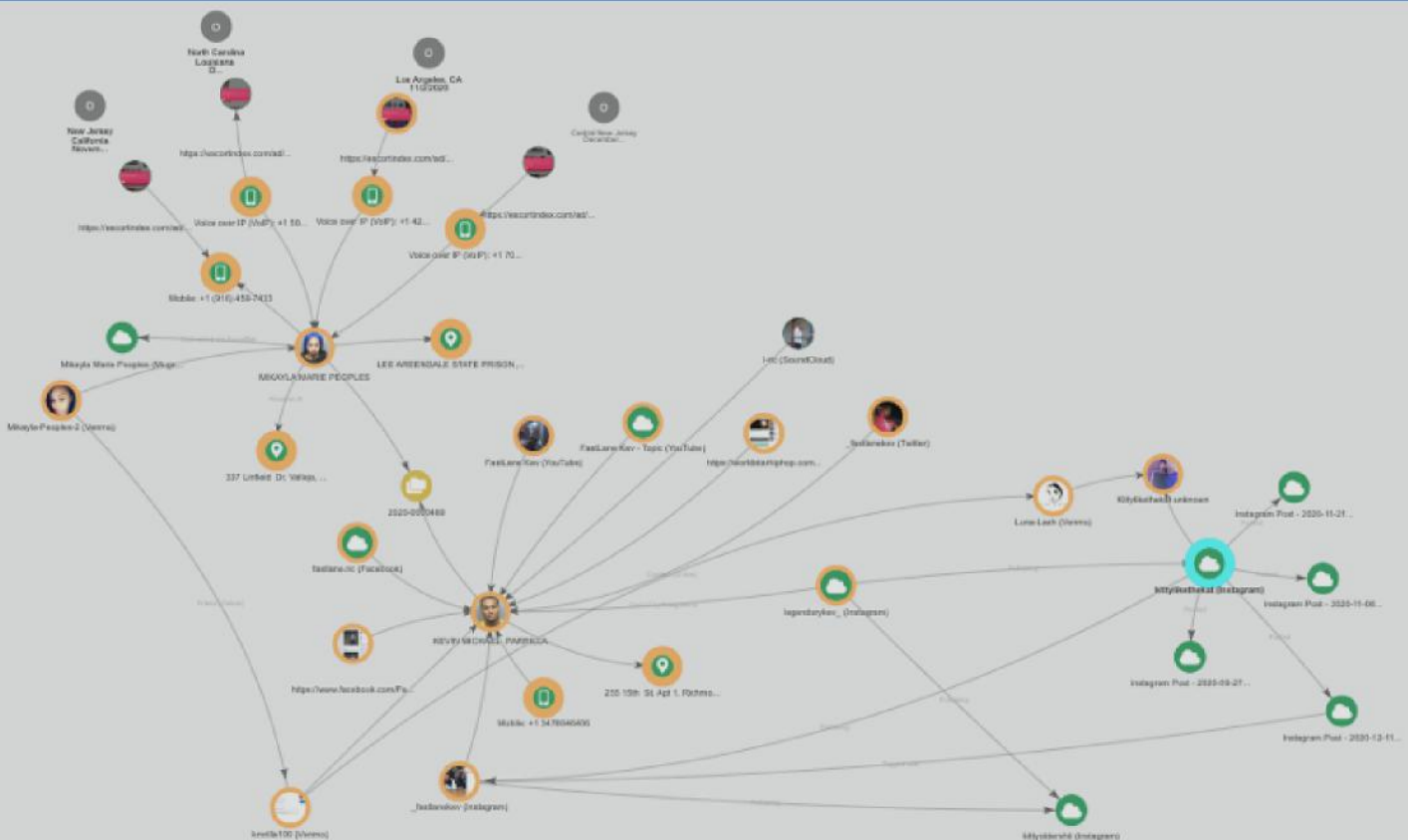
Through open-source analysis and the use of P.A.T.H. the DeliverFund Analyst was able identify the receiver of the phone calls. The RECEIVER had extensive criminal history to include: Witness/Victim intimidation, conspiracy to commit a crime, murder, possession of controlled substance, and receiving stolen property. Of particular interest, RECEIVER was arrested on April 16, 2015, in connection to an attempted shooting of a 16-year-old girl.

A CASE STUDY

The DeliverFund Analyst was able to identify residence history and additional phone numbers used by RECEIVER. These additional phone numbers were also searched through PATHfinder and Verus to determine if they were. Also used associated with human trafficking. They were not identified in any CSA or other calls made by CALLER.

DeliverFund Analysts was able to search RECEIVER's name on Venmo and identify a username and associates. One of these associated accounts indicated a payment titled "bnb" in June. Traffickers are known to use motels as well as commercial residential lodging to conduct their business. RECEIVER's Venmo account was identified as connected to CALLER's Venmo Account.

An analysis of the social network was conducted within P.A.T.H. and identified 8 social media accounts associated with RECEIVER. Further analysis of the social media accounts identified vehicles with licenses plates that were able to be attributed to RECEIVER. Further analysis of social media identified photos of RECEIVER with large amounts of cash supporting information provided by RECEIVER to CALLER in recorded calls.



A CASE STUDY

Human traffickers are known to move to exploit law enforcement jurisdictional constraints. An analysis of social media overlaid with license plate reader data showed correlated movement in New Jersey and New York.

An analysis of the CALLER social media and background identified many CSA in California, and New Jersey associated with phone numbers attributed to CALLER. Utilizing reverse image search techniques, additional advertisements were identified with images of CALLER and VOIP numbers used for contact in the ads. These advertisements were placed while CALLER was incarcerated and posted by an unknown person which indicates there are additional unidentified victims in the network.

The combination of these technologies was instrumental in identifying a human trafficking network that was continuing to operate while a member was incarcerated. The application of the technologies and expertise of DeliverFund and LEO technologies allowed for insight into a network that the criminal justice authorities would have had no insight to without them. Because of the public-private partnership approach, authorities were able to take appropriate action to disrupt this network.

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