

Psychology, Public Policy, and Law

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Online First Publication, December 22, 2022. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/law0000378>

CITATION

Dianiska, R. E., Luna, S., Winks, K. M. H., Quas, J. A., & Redlich, A. D. (2022, December 22). Current Investigator Practices and Beliefs on Interviewing Trafficked Minors. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*. Advance online publication. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/law0000378>

Current Investigator Practices and Beliefs on Interviewing Trafficked Minors

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Despite significant increases in attention during the past 2 decades to the problem of sex trafficking, especially of minors, little is known about how investigators identify, engage, and ultimately question suspected victims. Here we address this gap by surveying investigators in the United States about their interactions with and beliefs about minor trafficking victims. Local, state, and federal law enforcement investigators and related legal professionals ($N = 148$) completed an online questionnaire about their current practices and challenges they face when identifying and interviewing suspected minor victims of trafficking; their knowledge surrounding youth, sex trafficking, and interviewing; and factors believed to be important to the successful prosecution of traffickers. Common indicators of sex trafficking reported by respondents included the victim's background and behavior during an interview and physical corroboration. Frequent challenges included the minor's previous interactions with authorities and their relationship to the trafficker. Finally, victim disclosure and corroborating physical evidence were believed to be most important for successful prosecution. Results have policy and training implications regarding methods of improving identification and prosecution of traffickers.

Keywords: commercial sexual exploitation of minors, investigative interviewing, law enforcement, sex trafficking

The commercial sexual exploitation, or sex trafficking, of adults and children is pervasive both domestically and abroad. It is estimated that more than 200,000 minors worldwide are victims of sexual exploitation annually (Butler, 2014), and during the past several decades, growing amounts of attention have been directed toward identifying and intervening on behalf of trafficking victims. Yet, prosecution of perpetrators remains difficult. A key reason for this, according to prosecutors, is the lack of detailed information disclosed by the minor victims themselves (Farrell et al., 2014; Lavoie et al., 2019). Much of the effort directed toward gathering this information, though, falls not on prosecutors but instead on law enforcement, who comprise the most common type of first

responders to encounter and question suspected minor victims (Wilson et al., 2006). Law enforcement must assess minors' risk and needs, secure disclosures, and collect evidence about the perpetrator, exploitation, and control, while simultaneously providing some protection for the victims. How much law enforcement understand about the minor victims they encounter, including risk factors for trafficking and effective approaches to eliciting disclosures, how law enforcement manage challenges that arise during interviews, and what evidence they seek while questioning suspected minor victims, are all largely unknown but crucial to document as a first step toward determining what approaches and practices are most and least effective to improve victim identification and prosecution.

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Portions of this work were presented at the annual meetings of the American Psychology-Law Society (March, 2022). Data and supplemental materials can be found on OSF accessed at osf.io/4js2f (Dianiska et al., 2022).

This work was generously supported by the Criminal Investigations and Network Analysis Center (CINA)/Department of Homeland Security (17STCIN00001-05-00) and the National Science Foundation (1921187/1921250). We also thank the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers (FLETC) and the numerous law enforcement agencies, human trafficking organizations, and task forces who generously offered their assistance in recruiting respondents. The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Criminal Investigations and Network Analysis Center, the Department of Homeland Security, or the National Science Foundation.

Rachel E. Dianiska served as lead for data curation, formal analysis, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing and served in a supporting role for investigation and methodology. Samantha Luna served in a supporting role for investigation, methodology, project administration, and writing—review and editing. Kaitlin M. H. Winks served in a supporting role for investigation, methodology, and writing—review and editing. Jodi A. Quas contributed equally to conceptualization, funding acquisition, project administration, and supervision and served in a supporting role for investigation, methodology, and writing—review and editing. Allison D. Redlich contributed equally to conceptualization, funding acquisition, and supervision and served in a supporting role for investigation, methodology, project administration, and writing—review and editing.

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The overarching purpose of the present study was to provide this insight. To do so, we conducted a national survey of law enforcement investigators in the United States. We asked investigators about their experiences and training relevant to criminal investigations and prosecution of cases involving minor sex trafficking; their knowledge of sex trafficking signs, interviewing best practices when they encounter suspected victims, and general adolescent development; and their perceptions of evidence needed to successfully prosecute traffickers.

Law Enforcement Knowledge

A crucial starting point to understanding law enforcement's approach to investigating potential trafficking of minors is with an evaluation of how knowledgeable they are about the signs of trafficking, about who is at greatest risk, and about effective questioning in general. On the one hand, law enforcement are aware of the problem of trafficking and no longer simply see highly sensationalized or stereotypical versions of trafficking as being the norm (e.g., kidnapped and chained children being auctioned off to the highest bidder; Baker, 2014). Instead, they increasingly recognize more realistic depictions as being the most prevalent types of cases (e.g., domestically-based, at-risk minors being involved in controlling relationships; victims being isolated from friends, family, and community; Gerassi et al., 2021). Likewise, with regard to questioning of minors, although law enforcement still at times use similar interrogation tactics when questioning adolescent versus adult suspects of crime (which could include some minor victims who present as delinquents), law enforcement do recognize developmental differences in suggestibility, including that adolescents are more prone to error than adults (Meyer & Reppucci, 2007; Reppucci et al., 2010), and report a need to vary questioning practices based on youth age (Snow et al., 2021). Finally, law enforcement also appear cognizant that more than one interview might be needed with victims (Duron & Remko, 2020; Malloy et al., 2007) and suspects (Kassin et al., 2007) to elicit full disclosures.

On the other hand, it is less clear as to how knowledgeable law enforcement are about specific indicators of trafficking, or about how victims' history and development may shape their risk for trafficking and their interactions with law enforcement. For instance, trafficked minors often grow up in unstable or violent homes, have a history of sexual abuse or other forms of maltreatment, and engage in high-risk or delinquent behavior, such as using illegal substances, repeatedly running away (e.g., from foster or group home settings), being in a gang, or engaging in "survival sex" (Choi, 2015; Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Lavoie et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2010; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Williamson & Prior, 2009). Traffickers may exploit victims' history or behavior to manipulate them, in some cases by providing shelter, material goods, or drugs, or providing feigned support or even love and romance to induce compliance (Gibbs et al., 2015; Kennedy et al., 2007; Reid, 2016). Victims, as a result, may feel attached to their trafficker and hence be unwilling to disclose wrongdoing (Doychak & Raghavan, 2020). Whether law enforcement recognize common features of victims' history or relationship to their trafficker is unknown, but important to determine, given that law enforcement's recognition may well affect how they react and respond when they encounter a suspected minor victim.

Given that a majority of minor victims of trafficking begin being trafficked and are questioned by law enforcement about trafficking during the adolescent years (Smith et al., 2009), it is of considerable interest to ascertain how much law enforcement know about adolescent development generally, particularly developmental characteristics that can both place minors at risk for victimization and increase their reluctance to tell adults about that victimization. One such characteristic is that of impulsiveness. That is, in high-emotion situations and situations with peers, adolescents often have difficulty controlling impulsive tendencies (Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996), increasing likelihood of poor decision-making and engagement in risky behaviors and creating opportunities for others to manipulate adolescents. Adolescents' growing need for autonomy may lead them to assume more responsibility for involvement in risky behavior than is warranted and to them failing to recognize or not wanting to admit having been manipulated.

When questioned about their own risky behavior or that of peers, including behavior that may have resulted in harm, or about potential victimization, adolescents may well be reluctant to tell and may deny such experiences or their own involvement (Katz, 2013; Quas et al., 2022). Adolescents may fear getting into trouble, hold strong allegiances to their peers, or believe that they are autonomous agents making their own choices about how to act (Pimentel et al., 2015; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005). Further, when questioned by law enforcement, adolescents may not maintain eye contact, or at least maintain less eye contact than adults typically do (Arnold et al., 2000; Levine & Sutton-Smith, 1973). Adolescents may also provide inconsistent narratives or change their answers to repeated questions (Larkina et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 1995), in part as a result of their greater susceptibility than adults to suggestive influences (Frumkin et al., 2012). Law enforcement, however, do not consistently recognize such tendencies or susceptibility to suggestions are developmentally normative, believing instead that behaviors like evasiveness, avoiding eye contact, and inconsistencies are indicators of adolescent deception (Vrij et al., 2006). Whether this lack of recognition exists or whether law enforcement are now better informed about characteristics of adolescent development needs to be documented.

Challenges to Victim Questioning

The aforementioned findings suggest that minor victims' history, behaviors, and development likely pose challenges when law enforcement question and attempt to elicit information from suspected minor trafficking victims. Furthermore, even if law enforcement possesses adequate knowledge about trafficking, adolescence, or interviewing practices, it is unknown as to whether they can apply that knowledge when interacting with suspected victims or, stated another way, whether law enforcement encounter challenges when questioning suspected minor victims, and if so, what strategies they use in response.

One set of challenges concerns mistrust of law enforcement and legal professionals, possibly arising from adolescents' history of interactions with social service and legal professionals (e.g., resulting from having being removed from parents because of maltreatment or having been interrogated for suspected delinquent activity). That mistrust could contribute to evasiveness in interviews, but also to more sustained uncooperativeness throughout a

criminal investigation and prosecution. Several recent studies indeed support these possibilities, with victims demonstrating evasiveness in police interviews and at trials (Henderson et al., 2021; Nogalska et al., 2021) or not appearing altogether for interviews or trials (Quas et al., 2022).

Other challenges can arise from the victims' relationship to their trafficker. Traffickers may provide material goods, shelter, or protection, or feign romance (Gibbs et al., 2015; Kennedy et al., 2007; Reid, 2016) as means of leading victims to believe that they need the traffickers to survive (i.e., trauma coercive bonding; Doychak & Raghavan, 2020). Victims' financial dependence on the trafficker, separate from or in addition to any perceived romantic relationship, could lead to high levels of reluctance on the part of victims to identify the trafficker. Some evidence suggests that victims may have been coached by a trafficker on what to say to law enforcement (Farrell et al., 2019), raising additional concerns about victim deception. Despite these challenges likely being present, to our knowledge, how often law enforcement actual report encountering them has yet to be documented. Nor has research focused on what law enforcement who recognize challenges do to overcome them.

State and federal legislation and funding (e.g., Office for Victims of Crime, 2022; Trafficking Victims Protection Act, 2000; Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization, 2017) have been devoted toward creating collaborative teams, often referred to as "enhanced collaborative models" or ECMs, that work together to collect evidence about and successfully prosecute traffickers (see McCoy et al., 2022). ECMs emphasize trauma-centered approaches that prioritize victims' well-being as a way of improving legal professionals' relationships with victims and securing victims' ongoing participation in a criminal case. However, there are no standardized ECM protocols, and some law enforcement may not know about ECMs. Nonetheless, law enforcement may have, based on their own experiences, developed strategies to facilitate victim participation and disclosure and to overcome potential challenges that may arise during criminal investigations. These strategies need to be documented so that they can be examined directly.

Evidence for Prosecution

Because law enforcement must gather sufficient evidence that allows for prosecution of the trafficker, of interest here is what types of evidence law enforcement see as most valuable to collect, and, of course whether the types are consistent with those reported by prosecutors as most important for prosecutorial success. A few studies have documented the types of evidence prosecutors use to make decisions about whether to accept a trafficking case and then the success of that case. For instance, although documentation or evidence of the activities of force, fraud, or coercion used to manipulate victims is not legally *necessary* to prove trafficking when the victim is under 18, prosecutors report relying heavily on proof of at least one such activity to accept a case and move forward with charges of sex trafficking of minor victims (Farrell et al., 2014). Another type of evidence prosecutors report weighing heavily is electronic or physical evidence (e.g., digital downloads, hotel records, social media posts, text messages) (Farrell et al., 2016). Prosecutors' reliance on physical evidence makes sense as it can demonstrate coercion and control and may bolster the credibility of a victim (whose statement may otherwise be seen as untrustworthy). It has also been linked to increased

likelihood of conviction (Albonetti, 1987; Farrell et al., 2012; Nichols & Heil, 2015; Spohn, 2014).

Finally, prosecutors cite victim cooperativeness, interview disclosures, and testimony as highly influential to their case (Farrell et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2009). With trafficking victims specifically, prosecutors express concerns that victims' relationship to the perpetrator will undermine their cooperation (Nichols & Heil, 2015; Reid & Jones, 2011) and victim uncooperativeness is associated with reduced likelihood of prosecutors accepting a case (Farrell et al., 2016; Farrell & Kane, 2020; Nichols & Heil, 2015; O'Neal et al., 2015). Without victim testimony, or with testimony from a hostile or evasive victim, it may be difficult to prove coercion, force, or control; instead, laypersons but also the judge could perceive minors as being complicit partners rather than victims themselves, reducing prosecutors' likelihood of success.

Successful prosecution therefore relies on effective evidence gathering, which, in many cases, requires knowledgeable, strategic, and victim-centered approaches by law enforcement. Yet, what law enforcement see as important and hence what they *should* prioritize when carrying out an investigation is not well understood. Stated another way, given law enforcement's responsibility to investigate and collect evidence relevant to the crime of sex trafficking of a minor, it is imperative to document what case elements they target as being most important for success, and whether these elements overlap with evidence important to successful prosecution.

The Present Study

In the present study, we examined knowledge of, experiences with, and challenges faced by law enforcement investigators when interviewing minors suspected of trafficking in the United States. We were interested in investigators' knowledge of trafficking, adolescent development, and best-practice forensic interviewing approaches, all of which shape in important ways how investigators respond to suspected minor trafficking victims. We were also interested in the types of challenges investigators report encountering during interviews and the types of evidence they feel are most important to successful prosecution.

In many ways, our research is exploratory and descriptive, given that relatively little is known about law enforcement's knowledge and perceptions with regard to questioning minors suspected of having been trafficked. However, some tentative hypotheses about predictors of knowledge, challenges, and evidence were able to be generated based on prior work. For instance, given evidence that law enforcement increasingly recognize developmental differences in suggestibility, law enforcement might endorse the use of nonsuggestive approaches and multiple interviews to elicit complete, accurate accounts from trafficking victims. On the other hand, law enforcement's tendency toward attributing partial responsibility on sex workers who allege sexual assault for having been victimized (Zvi, 2021) might extend to minors who are trafficked, leading to law enforcement seeing minors as partly responsible for their victimization and hence challenging to interview as a result.

Finally, and, although not a primary focus of the present study, it is important to acknowledge the potential for law enforcement investigators' gender to shape their knowledge, experiences, and perceptions of suspected minor trafficking

victims. Findings have been mixed with respect to gender differences in policing behaviors in general, such as in the use of supportive behaviors (Rabe-Hemp, 2008; Sun, 2007) or victim-centered interviewing techniques (Hirn Mueller et al., 2015), and in police perceptions of victims in general (Sleath & Bull, 2017; for reviews, see Archbold & Schulz, 2012; Poteyeva & Sun, 2009). However, when gender has been examined in relation to perceptions of, belief in, and responses to sexual abuse or other forms of family and community violence, consistent differences have emerged. Compared with male investigators, female investigators are more supportive of, tend to believe victims' accounts, and are better able to recognize family violence (McMullan et al., 2010). Thus, in the present study, we similarly expected female investigators to evidence better knowledge of trafficking and the challenges to interviewing suspected minor victims than male investigators.

Method

Recruitment

Participants (hereafter referred to as investigators) were recruited via contacts at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers (FLETC) and local law enforcement agencies and by contacting human trafficking organizations and task forces from 41 different states across the United States. Contacts were given brief emails and links to the survey to distribute, along with instructions about the general purpose of the study (see Luna et al., 2022, for further details). The contacts, as a result, distributed links to investigators rather than our team doing so directly. Accordingly, we have no way of knowing the number of individuals who received the invitation. Other law enforcement surveys have relied on similar recruitment strategies with unknown response rates (e.g., Kassin et al., 2007; Redlich et al., 2014). Per government rules, FLETC-recruited participants ($n = 63$) were unable to be compensated for their participation. Non-FLETC participants ($n = 85$) were offered a \$25 gift card to receive or donate, though about half declined compensation.

Participants

In total, 376 interested investigators consented to participate, 160 of whom completed the entire survey. Of the 160, 148 investigators were from state and local agencies ($n = 110$) or military and federal agencies ($n = 38$), and 12 were from other types of agencies (e.g., social and health services). Because of our interest in law enforcement investigators, and because the small number of individuals from other agencies, the latter were excluded, leading to the final $N = 148$. Investigators who signed the consent form but did not complete the entire survey ($n = 216$) did not significantly differ from those who did not in agency type, $\chi^2(2) = 3.01$, $p = .22$, Cramer's $V = .10$, or years of experience, $t(340) = .66$, $p = .25$, $d = .07$.

Demographic information for the final sample can be found in Table 1. The majority of investigators was male (64%) and White (73%). Mean age was approximately 45 years, with 18 years of experience. Almost all investigators reported having field experience interviewing alleged victims or suspects (96%), and a majority

Table 1
Demographics of Investigators

Measure	N/Range	%/M (SD)
Gender		
Male	95	64%
Female	45	30%
Missing	8	5%
Age	25–72	45.09 (9.40)
Race		
White	108	73%
Non-White	33	22%
Missing	7	5%
Education		
Associate degree or less	31	21%
Bachelor's degree	48	32%
Post-graduate Study	62	42%
Missing	7	5%
Agency type		
State/Local	110	74%
Military/Federal	38	26%
Years of experience	2–40	18.82 (9.34)
Field experience	142	96%
Percent of their work involving sex trafficking (%)	136	18% (22)
Investigating cases of youth sex trafficking	135	20% (25)
Interviewing suspected victims of youth sex trafficking	133	19% (25)
Interviewing suspected traffickers of youth	136	15% (24)
Developmental training		
Within the last year	36	24%
Within the last five years, or longer	65	44%
None	44	30%
Missing	3	2%
Sex trafficking training		
Within the last year	88	60%
Within the last five years, or longer	46	31%
None	11	7%
Missing	3	2%
Youth-specific sex trafficking training	16	11%
Missing	15	10%

reported having received developmental (68%) and recent sex trafficking training (60%).

Survey, Procedures, and Coding

Investigators across the United States were invited via email to participate in a survey assessing current practices for interviewing suspected victims of sex trafficking. Those who were interested in taking part provided online consent and were then directed to a separate link to complete the survey anonymously via Qualtrics. Although we did not include attention checks within the survey, we carefully reviewed open-ended responses to ensure quality responding.

The survey began with vignettes describing potential encounters with suspected victims and followed with four sections: demographics, training, and experience; knowledge of adolescents, trafficking, and interviewing; challenges and strategies in forensic interviews when attempting to elicit information from suspected minor victims; and perceptions of prosecution evidence in trafficking cases. All question sections were presented in the same order. The vignettes included experimental manipulations, and the sample size varied from that in the current sample size. Thus, the responses to the vignettes are reported elsewhere (Luna et al., 2022).

Demographics, Training, and Experience

Demographic questions asked about investigators' gender, age, race, and education. Next were questions about the type of agency at which investigators worked and how many years they had been in their career. Other questions concerned how important they believed it is to know about sex trafficking for their profession (1 = *not at all important*; 5 = *extremely important*), whether they had field experience interviewing alleged victims or suspects of crime (Y/N), what percent of their work involved interviewing suspected victims of youth sex trafficking, and whether they had received training in adolescent development (Y/N) and training in sex trafficking identification or intervention (Y/N).

Investigators were also asked to indicate how many interviews on average they conduct with the same trafficking victim to obtain a full disclosure; how long on average their initial interviews with a suspected victim of sex trafficking are; what percent of the time they audio and video record interviews with minors; what percent of the time victims disclose being forced to engage in sex for money, goods, or shelter in an initial interview; and what percent of the time youth provide false reports of being forced to engage in sex for money, goods, or shelter. Descriptive statistics for these practices can be found in Table 2.

Knowledge of Adolescence, Trafficking, and Interviewing

This section assessed investigators' knowledge of topics relevant to minor sex trafficking and investigation. It began with a series of true/false statements about *Sex Trafficking, Interviewing, and Adolescent Development*, derived from prior surveys (Beck et al., 2015; Blum & Bearinger, 1990; Larsen & Juhasz, 1986; Meyer & Reppucci, 2007; Quas et al., 2005; Stevens, 1984; Titchen et al., 2017). Investigators rated their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 6 = *strongly agree*; *do not know*) with each statement (see Appendix for the true/false statements). Eleven statements concerned situations of potential youth sex trafficking or risk factors for trafficking (e.g., running away, including from home, foster care, or group home, increases the likelihood of a youth being sex trafficked [true]). Eighteen statements focused on interactions and information gathering/interviewing of suspected youth victims (e.g., youth who are combative when talking to law enforcement are unlikely to be victims [false]). Finally, eight statements concerned typical adolescents' behaviors and thoughts in general (e.g., peer relationships can be a risk factor for delinquency [true]). We

dichotomized responses into correct (1 = ratings of 1–3 for false statements, which correspond to disagreeing, and ratings of 4–6 with true statements which correspond to agreeing) or incorrect (0 = ratings of 1–3 or disagreeing with true statements and ratings of 4–6 or agreeing with false statements). Three proportion scores were then created, reflecting the number of correct responses divided by the number of statements in each of the three domains separately: sex trafficking, interviewing, and adolescence. Descriptive statistics for knowledge domain accuracy can be found in Table 3.

A follow-up knowledge question asked investigators to list characteristics or signs during an encounter with a minor that are indicative of trafficking (i.e., "When you are interviewing a minor, what characteristics of the interviewee would lead you to believe the minor may be a victim of sex trafficking?"). The open-ended phrasing allowed investigators to respond freely without restricting the topics mentioned. Investigators' responses were reliably coded ($\kappa = .95$ on 100% of responses by two coders) into 15 types of signs. Many of these referred to behaviors or characteristics to which investigators were exposed during encounters with the minors. However, others referred to information gained potentially separate from the investigator-victim interaction (these are listed in Table 4). We heuristically grouped the signs into three categories: *Historical or background* signs of trafficking (i.e., characteristics of a minor's experiences, behaviors, or interactions outside of the interview context that were suggestive of victimization); *Interview behavior or inferred characteristics* (i.e., observed behaviors or signs based on how minors were acting during interviews); and *Evidence* independent of the victims' disclosures (i.e., signs unrelated to victims' behavior or experiences).

Interviewing Challenges and Strategies

We provided a list of 14 potential challenges that might arise during encounters with possible minor victims and asked investigators to rate how frequently (1 = *never*; 5 = *very often*) each challenge undermines their interview and ability to collect useful and reliable information. Challenges were selected based on those described in prior work on the investigation and prosecution of sex trafficking (Kennedy et al., 2007; Lavoie et al., 2019; Shively et al., 2017) and included those concerning *prior interactions* between the victim and authorities (e.g., distrust in law enforcement, uncooperative with authorities), the victim's *interview behavior* (e.g., evasiveness, hostility), the *trafficker's influence* (e.g., the minor's romantic relationship with the trafficker, financial dependence on the trafficker),

Table 2
Average Interviewing Practices With Suspected Sex Trafficking Victims

Interviewing practice	All	Female investigators	Male investigators	Effect size
How important to know about sex trafficking	4.42 (0.79)	4.71 (0.51)	4.33 (0.84)	$d = 0.51^*$
% of time video record interviews	62.99 (41.61)	60.22 (44.59)	65.58 (39.91)	$d = 0.13$
% of time audio record interviews	69.57 (40.82)	55.73 (45.98)	76.92 (35.91)	$d = 0.54^*$
Average length of initial interviews with suspected victims				Cramer's $V = 0.22$
Less than 1 hour	69 (51%)	16 (36%)	53 (58%)	
1 to 2 hours	44 (33%)	17 (39%)	27 (30%)	
More than 2 hours	22 (16%)	11 (25%)	11 (12%)	
% of time victims disclose being trafficked in initial interview	32.30 (22.37)	30.33 (22.31)	33.12 (22.76)	$d = 0.12$
% of time youth falsely report being trafficked	24.01 (26.50)	20.36 (28.34)	24.10 (24.49)	$d = 0.15$
Number of interviews with same victim for full disclosure	2.99 (1.53)	2.91 (1.17)	3.02 (1.70)	$d = 0.07$

Note. Values in parentheses are standard deviations. Cohen's d and Cramer's V values with * reflect significant differences at $p \leq .05$ between male and female investigators.

Table 3*Accuracy on Knowledge Domains*

Knowledge domain	All	Female investigators	Male investigators	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Trafficking situations ^a	.74 (.15)	.79 (.15)	.72 (.14)	<i>d</i> = 0.45*
Interviewing best practices ^b	.69 (.13)	.74 (.12)	.66 (.13)	<i>d</i> = 0.56*
Adolescent behavior ^c	.63 (.14)	.59 (.13)	.66 (.14)	<i>d</i> = -0.48*

Note. Knowledge domains sharing a superscript are statistically equivalent based on Bonferroni-corrected post hoc comparisons (reading down the All column). Values in parentheses are standard deviations. Cohen's *d* values with an * reflect significant gender differences at $p < .05$. Positive sign of Cohen's *d* reflects trend for female investigators to outperform male investigators.

and *availability of evidence* (lack of information to prepare for an interview; lack of corroborating evidence). Descriptive statistics for the reported frequency of encountering these challenges are presented in Table 5.

A follow-up open-ended question asked investigators what they do to overcome challenges when they encounter suspected victims. Their responses, which often contained multiple approaches, were reliably coded into two broad categories (reliability $\kappa = .95$, 100% by two coders): *rapport and relationship building* (e.g., building trust and rapport, being patient) or *interventions and support* (e.g., removal from the trafficker, attending to safety and basic needs of the victim).

Prosecution Evidence

In the final section, we asked investigators to rate on a scale of 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely* the importance of seven forms of evidence to the prosecution of traffickers. Forms were selected based on those identified in prior research as mentioned frequently by prosecutors or in trials involving trafficking of a minor (Cassidy et al., 2020; Clawson et al., 2008; Farrell et al., 2014, 2016). Descriptive statistics for the perceived importance of these forms of evidence is located in Table 6. A final open-ended prompt followed asking investigators to describe any other types of evidence that are particularly important.

Table 4

Frequent Characteristics of Minor Sex Trafficking Situations Endorsed by Investigators

Sex trafficking indicators	% Reported
Background characteristics	
Another person in charge of the minor or their belongings	25%
Unstable home (runaway, homelessness, dependency system)	23%
Isolation from social support	13%
Prior maltreatment	13%
Delinquent and criminal behaviors	13%
Behavior during interview	
Evasiveness, hostility	36%
Age-inappropriate sexual knowledge or behavior	18%
Appearance (malnourishment, cleanliness, type of clothing)	17%
Distrust in or lack of respect towards law enforcement	13%
Behavioral indicators (lack of eye contact, crying)	13%
Inconsistent disclosures	7%
Demeaning characteristic (manipulative, untrustworthy)	4%
Physical corroboration	
Physical evidence (cell phone history, fake ID)	21%
Tattoos or branding	12%

Note. Because these indicators of minor sex trafficking situations were derived from characteristics mentioned in investigators' open-ended responses ($\kappa = .95$), the reported percent of investigators who provided each characteristic need not sum to 100%.

These were reliably coded ($\kappa = .95$ on 100% of responses by two coders) into three categories: *victim-focused* (e.g., securing and encouraging their cooperation with the case, providing support and helping victims get assistance from victim service providers); *perpetrator-focused* (e.g., evidence of the traffickers' business logistics, like advertising and financials); and *legal actor-focused* (e.g., training on trafficking statutes, prosecutor communication). Because less than a third of investigators provided a response to this open-ended prompt ($n = 44$), we discuss these data in qualitative themes.

At the end of the survey, investigators were thanked for their participation. Those not recruited by FLETC were redirected to a separate link to provide their name and e-mail to receive a \$25 gift card (about half declined). Data and materials are available on the first author's Open Science Framework (OSF) page (see Dianiska et al., 2022; osf.io/4js2f).

Results

Data Analysis Plan

Preliminary analyses first examined how investigator demographics related to their work experience and practices. Chi-square analyses tested the relations among agency type, gender, and recent sex trafficking training. Correlations and *t* tests evaluated the relations among gender, investigator age, years of experience, and percent of their work involving trafficking. Second, investigators' reported practices and perceptions were subjected to *t* tests and chi-square tests to determine whether these varied by investigator gender.

Our main analyses are presented in three sections, corresponding to the three study goals: documenting what investigators know about adolescents, trafficking, and interviewing suspected minor victims; identifying what challenges investigators encounter when interacting with potential victims and how investigators overcome those challenges; and assessing what evidence investigators see as most important to successful prosecutions of trafficking cases. Investigators' knowledge accuracy scores and challenge scale ratings were analyzed separately via mixed model ANCOVAs. Gender was entered as a between-subjects factor, each questionnaire section's dependent measure (accuracy on knowledge domains, perceived frequency of challenges, perceived importance of evidence) were entered as a within-subject factor, and years of experience was entered as a covariate. Open-ended responses for perceived characteristics of trafficking victims and strategies to overcome challenges were analyzed via Generalized Estimating Equations (GEEs). Gender, recent sex trafficking training, and overall knowledge (derived from the knowledge domain scores) served as predictors.

Table 5*Mean Frequency of Occurrences That Inhibit the Interview Process: (1 = Never, 5 = Very Often)*

Challenge	All	Female investigators	Male investigators	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Minor's distrust of authorities ^a	4.37 (0.68)	4.51 (0.63)	4.30 (0.71)	<i>d</i> = 0.32
Evasiveness in interview ^{a,b}	4.12 (0.80)	4.11 (0.83)	4.13 (0.80)	<i>d</i> = -0.03
Minor financially dependent on trafficker ^{a,b}	4.09 (0.88)	4.09 (0.90)	4.08 (0.89)	<i>d</i> = 0.01
Uncooperative with authorities (e.g., running away from social services, refusing to testify) ^{a,b}	4.08 (0.79)	4.00 (0.80)	4.10 (0.82)	<i>d</i> = -0.12
Minor's romantic relationship with trafficker ^{b,c}	3.89 (0.92)	4.18 (0.89)	3.78 (0.85)	<i>d</i> = 0.46*
Isolation (trafficker limits contact with others) ^{b,c}	3.83 (0.93)	3.93 (1.02)	3.76 (0.89)	<i>d</i> = 0.19
Minor's hostility ^{b,c}	3.65 (0.87)	3.64 (1.03)	3.65 (0.82)	<i>d</i> = 0.00
Lack of belief on the part of the minor that they are a victim ^{b,c}	3.65 (0.85)	3.71 (0.94)	3.64 (0.81)	<i>d</i> = 0.09
Minor lying (e.g., giving false names or ages) ^{b,c}	3.61 (0.94)	3.33 (1.00)	3.74 (0.91)	<i>d</i> = -0.43*
Coaching by the trafficker on how to obstruct law enforcement ^{c,d}	3.45 (0.89)	3.51 (0.87)	3.41 (0.92)	<i>d</i> = 0.12
Immaturity ^{c,d}	3.37 (0.88)	3.24 (0.93)	3.40 (0.87)	<i>d</i> = -0.17
Lack of corroborating evidence (e.g., cell or online messaging, medical evidence) ^d	3.23 (0.88)	3.07 (0.94)	3.26 (0.84)	<i>d</i> = -0.23
Minor's autonomy/active participation in trafficking (e.g., they are doing it of their own volition) ^d	3.10 (0.95)	3.11 (1.01)	3.10 (0.94)	<i>d</i> = 0.01
Lack of information to prepare for interview ^d	2.94 (0.76)	2.71 (0.73)	3.06 (0.75)	<i>d</i> = -0.46*

Note. Challenges sharing a superscript are statistically equivalent based on Bonferroni-corrected post hoc comparisons (reading down the All column). For instance, the perceived frequency of a minor's distrust of authorities, evasiveness, financial dependence on the trafficker, and uncooperativeness with authorities were not statistically different from each other after adjusting for multiple comparisons. Values in parentheses are standard deviations. Cohen's *d* values with an * reflect significant gender differences at $p < .05$. Positive sign of Cohen's *d* reflects trend for female investigators to outperform male investigators.

Preliminary Analyses

Age was related to agency type: Federal/military investigators were slightly older ($M = 48$, $SD = 8.86$) than state/local investigators ($M = 44$, $SD = 9.40$), $t(139) = 2.27$, $p = .03$, $d = .44$. Age was not, however, related to recent sex trafficking training ($r = -.14$, $p = .11$) or percent of work involved in trafficking ($r = -.10$, $p = .27$). As might be expected, age and years of experience were highly correlated, $r = .82$, $p < .01$, but years of experience was not related to recent sex trafficking training ($r = -.03$, $p = .70$) or percent of work involving trafficking ($r = .14$, $-.07$, $p = .39$). Given our interest in investigators' experiences in the field, more than their age per se, when appropriate in analyses, we included years of experience as a covariate; however, years of experience did not serve as a significant covariate in any model.

Analyses comparing male and female investigators revealed that male investigators had more years of experience ($M = 20.83$, $SD = 9.58$) than did female investigators ($M = 15.82$, $SD = 7.55$),

$t(135) = 3.07$, $p = .01$, $d = .56$, and males made up a larger percentage of investigators from state/local agencies (74% male) than federal agencies (49% male), $\chi^2(1) = 7.96$, $p = .01$, Cramer's $V = .24$. Gender was unrelated to investigators having had a recent sex trafficking training, $\chi^2(1) = .37$, $p = .54$, Cramer's $V = .05$, or the percent of their work that involved trafficking, $t(132) = .55$, $p = .58$, $d = .10$.

Investigator Experiences and Practices

When we considered the type of training and experience investigators had with minor victims, particularly victims who may have been trafficked, nearly all investigators rated knowledge about sex trafficking as important to their profession ($M = 4.42$, $SD = .79$; on a 5-pt scale). Most also reported frequently video or audio recording interviews with victims (see the All column, Table 2). Investigators stated that the average length of their initial interview with suspected victims was less than one hour, but of interest, this

Table 6*Mean Frequency of Factors for Successful Prosecution: (1 = Not at All, 5 = Extremely Important)*

Evidence	All	Female investigators	Male investigators	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Disclosure/identification of pimp(s) ^a	4.58 (0.57)	4.60 (0.58)	4.59 (0.58)	<i>d</i> = 0.01
Corroborating physical evidence (e.g., texts) ^a	4.39 (0.72)	4.49 (0.70)	4.36 (0.72)	<i>d</i> = 0.18
Conducting interviews from a trauma-informed or victim-centered approach ^a	4.28 (0.77)	4.58 (0.69)	4.14 (0.78)	<i>d</i> = 0.58*
Disclosure/identification of other victims ^a	4.08 (0.89)	3.96 (1.04)	4.12 (0.84)	<i>d</i> = -0.18
Corroborating witness evidence (e.g., neighbors, friends) ^a	4.06 (0.85)	4.07 (0.84)	4.08 (0.87)	<i>d</i> = -0.01
Conducting interviews in accordance to national guidelines (going "by the book" to preempt defense challenges) ^b	3.60 (1.09)	3.62 (1.11)	3.55 (1.09)	<i>d</i> = 0.06
Disclosure/identification of clients or "John"(s) ^b	3.26 (1.21)	2.98 (1.34)	3.36 (1.17)	<i>d</i> = -0.31

Note. Types of evidence sharing a superscript are statistically equivalent based on Bonferroni-corrected post hoc comparisons. Values in parentheses are standard deviations. Cohen's *d* values with an * reflect significant gender differences at $p < .05$. Positive sign of Cohen's *d* reflects trend for female investigators to outperform male investigators.

interview only led to disclosures for about a third of the victims, responses that suggest investigators recognize high risks for disclosure reluctance in their victims. Indeed, when asked how many interviews it takes to elicit a full disclosure, investigators' mean response was *three* interviews. And finally, investigators reported that youth *falsely* report being trafficked nearly a quarter of the time (24%).

Gender differences were also observed with respect to investigator beliefs about training and investigation experiences. Females believed it is more important to know about sex trafficking for their profession, $t(138) = 2.83, p = .01, d = .51$. Females also reported longer initial interviews (greater than 1 hr), $\chi^2(2) = 6.54, p = .04$, Cramer's $V = .29$, than did males, and females said that they audio recorded interviews less often, $t(118) = 2.73, p = .01, d = .54$. However, gender differences did not emerge in video recording interviews, $t(125) = .68, p = .50, d = .13$, or in investigators' perceptions of how often minors disclose being trafficked in an *initial* interview, $t(130) = .66, p = .51, d = .12$, or falsely claim being trafficked, $t(127) = .77, p = .44, d = .15$. Additional analyses, though, revealed that the significant gender effects persisted when agency type was also included in the model. Because of the latter, and because of often-observed gender differences in perceptions of sexual assault (Bottoms et al., 2014) and our tentative hypotheses, gender was included in main analyses.

Knowledge of Sex Trafficking, Interviewing, and Adolescence

Our first goal focused on documenting investigators' knowledge about key domains relevant to identification and questioning of minor victims: sex trafficking, interviewing techniques, and adolescent development. Two of the three knowledge accuracy scores, sex trafficking and interviewing, were moderately correlated ($r = .49, p < .01$; other r s $< .05, p$ s $> .34$), but not so highly to suggest the items were tapping a singular underlying knowledge construct.

When the three knowledge scores were entered as a within-subjects dependent measure into a 2 (*Gender*: male, female) $\times$ 3 (*Knowledge domain*: trafficking situations, interviewing best practices, adolescent behaviors) mixed model ANCOVA with years of experience covaried (see Table 3), a significant main effect of Knowledge domain emerged, $F(1.82, 241.25)^1 = 5.10, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$, but was subsumed by a significant Gender $\times$ Knowledge domain interaction, $F(1.82, 241.25) = 12.99, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$. Accuracy scores were highest for trafficking, then interviewing best practices, and then general adolescent behavior. The interaction suggested that these trends were being driven by female investigators, who evidenced better knowledge of trafficking and interviewing best practices. Male investigators' knowledge did not differ across domains.

A review of the accuracy scores (and responses to the individual items, see Appendix) provides some insight into investigators' general understanding of and likely ability to recognize and respond to some situations involving potential trafficking risk. However, the scores do not reveal what specific signs investigators look for to help guide their interpretation of potential risky situations involving possible adolescent victims. The follow-up open-ended prompt that asked investigators to report what signs they looked for to indicate trafficking tapped into this issue more directly. Investigators' responses (see Table 4) revealed that, among *background characteristics*, investigators mentioned someone else being in charge of

the minor and her or his belongings as being a key indicator of trafficking risk. In terms of a minor's *behavior during an interview*, investigators frequently mentioned minors' hostility and evasiveness as being important signs of trafficking. Less common, but still noteworthy, was inappropriate sexual knowledge or behavior. Finally, the most noteworthy *evidence*-based sign of trafficking reported by investigators was electronic in nature, such as text messages or social media posts. Together, these open-ended responses suggest that investigators do recognize some signs of trafficking that are consistently noted as actual indicators (e.g., Franchino-Olsen, 2021; Moore et al., 2020; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019). Such recognition is important, and, in combination, likely extremely valuable in directing investigators' efforts.

We conducted an exploratory analysis of investigators' open-ended responses about signs of trafficking, subjecting their coded responses to an omnibus Generalized Estimating Equation (GEE) with Gender, Recent Sex Trafficking Training, and Overall Knowledge (i.e., the average score across the three domains) as predictors. No significant effects emerged, Wald's $< 1.69, p$ s $> .19$, suggesting that neither recent training nor enhanced knowledge overall was related to the signs investigators reported as being useful in identifying trafficking.

Interviewing Challenges and Strategies

Our second goal involved documenting the challenges investigators face when attempting to elicit information from suspected minor victims and how investigators attempt to overcome those challenges. Because investigators' ratings of the frequency with which they encounter challenges were not highly correlated (most r s $< .20$), we were unable to group challenges to reduce the number of items examined. Thus, we analyzed each perceived challenge separately. Investigators' mean ratings of how often they encounter challenges are presented in Table 5. As is evident, investigators saw the minor's distrust of authorities, evasiveness in interviews, being financially dependent on the trafficker, and being uncooperative with authorities as being the most challenging issues to overcome. Not having sufficient information to prepare for the interview was rated as a less common but still moderately frequent challenge.

A 2 (Gender) $\times$ 14 (Challenges) mixed model ANCOVA with years of experience covaried revealed a significant main effect of Challenge, $F(10.49, 1311.35)^2 = 9.49, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$, and significant Gender $\times$ Challenge interaction, $F(10.49, 1311.35) = 2.45, p < .01, \eta^2 = .01$. Follow-up post hoc comparisons with Bonferroni corrections for each of the individual challenges (superscripts, Table 5) revealed that challenges seen as most common reflect the minors' behavior during the interview, including the minor's unwillingness to answer questions, uncooperativeness, and mistrust of authorities, along with the minor's financial dependence on the defendant. Significantly lower rated (though again still moderately frequent) challenges concerned the minor's need for autonomy, lack of information to prepare, and corroborative evidence. Finally, concerns about the trafficker having coached victims was rated as significantly less

¹ Mauchly's test of sphericity violated, Mauchly's $W(2) = 0.91, p < .001, \epsilon = .91$.

² Mauchly's test of sphericity violated, Mauchly's $W(90) = 0.18, p < .01, \epsilon = .80$.

frequently countered than the aforementioned challenges. The remaining challenges fell in between these sets and did not differ from either.

The significant Gender $\times$ Challenge interaction was driven by three challenges. Female investigators reported that the minor's *romantic relationship with the trafficker* was a more frequent challenge ($d = .46$) than did male investigators, whereas male investigators reported that the *minor lying* ($d = -0.43$) and *lacking information to prepare for the interview* ($d = -0.46$), were more frequent challenges.

When we explored investigators' open-ended responses regarding how they overcome these challenges, descriptively, rapport and relationship building efforts were most commonly mentioned. More than half of the investigators (52%) described efforts to establish a relationship with a victim to encourage trust, comfort, and honesty. For instance, one investigator noted the importance of rapport, stating, "Make [the victims] feel comfortable, show support. They need to see that you care more about them than their trafficker does." As mentioned above, investigators stated that, on average, three interviews were needed to elicit complete disclosures—in part, because "building trust is a major factor and can often times take multiple interviews. However, once trust is built the communication becomes much better." Among approaches that facilitated intervention and support, common strategies included investigators stating that they attend to the safety and basic needs of the victim (38%), that they reinforce that the minor is a victim (10%), and that they remove the victim from their trafficker (8%). Examples include "making them feel safe and also having a secured plan for where the minor can go if they 'give up' the pimp," and "treating them as a victim and offering them a way out, provide them immediate services as in clothes, food and medical assistance."

We examined predictors of strategies investigators reported using to overcome interview challenges via an omnibus GEE with investigator gender, recent sex trafficking training, and overall knowledge as predictors. Only the effect of Gender was significant, $\chi^2(1) = 10.70$, $p < .01$. More female (30%) than male (5%) investigators reported that conducting multiple interviews with victims helps to overcome interviewing challenges, $\chi^2(1) = 10.85$, $p < .01$. No other effects were significant (Wald's < 1.95 , $ps > .16$). Thus, the methods investigators report using to overcome challenges did not vary as a function of recent training, general knowledge, and for the most part investigator gender.

Prosecution Evidence

Our final goal focused on investigators' perceptions of the value of different forms of evidence for prosecuting trafficking cases involving minor victims. We entered investigators' ratings (1 = *not at all important*; 5 = *extremely important*) of the seven types of evidence (selected based on their importance to prosecutors) into a mixed model 2 (Gender) $\times$ 7 (type of evidence) ANCOVA, with years of experience covaried. The main effect of Evidence, $F(4.45, 580.36)^3 = 7.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$, and the Gender $\times$ Evidence interaction, $F(4.45, 580.36) = 2.93$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .01$, were significant. Follow-up post hoc comparisons, with Bonferroni corrections, revealed that, although all forms of evidence were considered at least moderately important (i.e., rated above the midpoint of the 5-point scale), corroborating evidence and disclosure regarding pimps and other victims were rated as

significantly more important, while following proscribed interview guidelines and disclosure about clients were rated as significantly less important (superscripts, Table 6). The significant interaction revealed that, compared with male investigators, female investigators rated *conducting trauma-informed/victim-centered interviews* as more important to successful prosecution.

When given the opportunity to list additional forms of evidence that were useful, 44 investigators listed one or more. The most common types were less about concrete or physical evidence per se and more about strategies to increase longer-term involvement or commitment from victims. That is, 54% of the investigators who included a response focused on maintaining a relationship with or providing support to victims, such as "staying in contact with the victim" or "giving the youth receiving services to address the trauma associated with trafficking." Other responses (32%) were directed toward education or training of legal professionals about trafficking. Examples include "working with the Prosecutors and Judges in your area so they have a firm understanding of the human trafficking issues that exist" and "pretrial motion practice that seeks to exclude overly prejudicial evidence of "rape shield" evidence". Finally, a small percent (16%) of responses emphasized perpetrator's behavior, such as "anything in the trafficker's own words." In combination, investigators' responses to the evidence and the open-ended prompt highlight the significant value and separation of external evidence, that is, corroboration, and the victim's cooperation, both of which investigators see as crucial to increasing the likelihood of initial disclosures but also participation throughout a legal case.

Discussion

In this study we explored investigators' experiences, knowledge, and perceptions of sex trafficking cases in terms of factors used to identify victims, challenges faced when conducting investigations and interviewing victims, and factors important to prosecuting traffickers. Overall, investigators, particularly those who have been recently trained and who are women, evidence some valuable levels of knowledge about trafficking. Knowledge was noticeably lower for adolescent development, raising concerns that investigators may not be appropriately sensitive to developmental reasons for reluctance and nondisclosure, and age-appropriate interviewing techniques specifically for minor victims. Such insight into general adolescent reporting and disclosure tendencies may be important to consider when evaluating risk. Investigators' knowledge of interviewing practices fell in the midrange of our scale, with recent training associated with improved scores.

Turning to the main goals of our study and its particularly unique emphasis, when asked about characteristics that suggest a minor may be a victim of sex trafficking, investigators provided many empirically-validated criteria, including indicators from the minor's background (e.g., unstable home situation, prior maltreatment, another person in charge of the minor), their behavior during an interview (e.g., evasiveness or hostility), and physical corroboration (e.g., physical evidence, tattoos/branding). Regardless of investigator gender, training, or other characteristics of experience, investigators appear to be sensitive to trafficking risk factors that are, for

³ Mauchly's test of sphericity violated, Mauchly's $W(20) = 0.3$, $p < .01$, $\epsilon = .74$.

the most part, supported by empirical research. Encouragingly, characteristics that are more stereotypical, and likely inaccurate, such as inconsistent disclosure or demeaning attributions toward the minor (e.g., the minor is manipulative) were the least commonly provided.

The nature of a minor trafficking victim's expression of reluctance is complex and multifaceted. Investigators in our sample recognized that the minor's relationship with their trafficker and previous experiences with authority both pose significant challenges to the interview process. Indeed, the most frequently encountered challenges reported were the minor's distrust of authorities, evasiveness and uncooperativeness, and the fact that the minor is financially dependent or romantically involved with their trafficker. Coercion, be it through physical threats, financial abuse, or emotional attachment, is a defining characteristic of sex trafficking. In particular, commercial sexual exploitation can lead to the development of *trauma coercive bonding*, typified by a severe power imbalance between the victim and the trafficker, intermittent brutality and seductive behavior, social isolation, and a perceived inability to escape (Sanchez et al., 2019). One consequence of this bonding is that victims may not cooperate with authorities who attempt to intervene to protect or defend their trafficker (Doychak & Raghavan, 2020). Therefore, it is encouraging that investigators in our sample are aware of many of these factors as they relate to potential nondisclosure when interviewing suspected trafficking victims.

At the same time though, investigators saw their own relationship with suspected victims as being central to overcoming challenges. That is, when asked what tactics are most effective to combat challenges, more than half of investigators endorsed techniques that reflected building rapport and support to victims. Common techniques to do so included encouraging trust and comfort and exhibiting patience. Rapport building has been widely studied and shown to be effective in increasing cooperation and disclosure from a wide range of interviewees (Alison et al., 2013; Brimbal et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2020; for review, see Gabbert et al., 2021). Important to note here is that it seems as though investigators recognize the value of rapport building in their own practice (see also Vallano et al., 2015). Also interesting is that investigators' perceptions of challenges—and what to do about them—did not vary as a function of characteristics of investigators or their training.

A crucial goal of an interview with a suspected minor victim is to obtain sufficient details to identify and prosecute the adults who commercially exploit minors. Yet, investigators may view other types of evidence as equally if not more valuable to prosecution. Here, investigators believed that certain disclosures from the minor, primarily regarding either the pimp or other victims, and corroborating physical evidence as most important to successfully prosecute trafficking cases. In fact, in a survey of state prosecutors, evidence and victim testimony were two factors most likely to lead to prosecution of human trafficking (Farrell et al., 2016). In recognizing the importance of victim disclosures, it is likely that these investigators who are charged with securing evidence for prosecution likely prioritize evidence that prosecutors find most helpful and impactful in their cases. Law enforcement may therefore be able to strategically gather information during interviews in a way that facilitates prosecution and conviction. Female investigators and investigators with recent training in particular also noted the importance of trauma-informed or victim-centered interviews. This may be attributable to a recent increase in practitioners

calling for trauma-informed practices, such as the Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview (FETI; Strand, 2012) to effectively gather information from victims without retraumatizing them (Ostad-Hashemi, 2019; Rich, 2019).

One additional comment about our findings is warranted. Specifically, although not a primary aim of our work, gender differences were evident with respect to investigator knowledge, especially regarding sex trafficking and interviewing practices, the perceived frequency of encountering certain challenges, and the importance of certain kinds of evidence to successfully prosecute traffickers. Whereas female investigators were more likely than male investigators to state that the minor's romantic relationship with a trafficker is a challenge when interviewing victims, males were more likely than females to state that the minor lying during the interview is a more frequent challenge. These findings align with past studies showing gender-based differences in believing victims and endorsing trafficking myths (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016) as well as how victims of sexual assault are perceived (Bottoms et al., 2014). In the case of the latter, female mock jurors quite consistently exhibit more empathy toward victims compared with male mock jurors. Female law enforcement officers also more often report higher levels of empathy and concern (Schuck, 2014), which may account for our findings on endorsing more victim-centered approaches and recognizing that a minor's romantic relationship with their trafficker is a challenge than a male investigator. Thus, ongoing work needs to continue to take into account gender, including in nonbinary manners, when evaluating law enforcement's knowledge, experiences, and responses to trafficking.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our study involved a national survey of investigators from federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, and a broad range of investigators responded, as reflected in their age, years of experience, and location. Yet limitations must be acknowledged. First, the current sample includes only the 40% of investigators who completed the entire survey, suggesting that self-selection may have affected our findings. Investigators who answered every question may perceive sex trafficking cases differently from investigators who opted to consent to the survey but not answer the survey questions. Demographically, though, there were no differences between investigators who did and did not finish the survey (see Luna et al., 2022). Second, though we reached out to contacts in law enforcement organizations and trafficking task forces across 41 states, we did not use a national random survey drawing from all states, which could limit the generalizability of our findings. Further, our goal was to explore knowledge and perceptions of identification and interviewing of sex trafficking victims. Because of the self-report nature of our survey, however, reported frequency of these behaviors may not align with how often they occur or are conducted in practice. Additionally, though law enforcement were largely accurate on the tested knowledge domains, whether investigators are able to and do efficiently apply that knowledge in their actual interactions with victims is unknown. Future work should evaluate in a more objective manner, for instance, how often frequently reported interview challenges occur in practice.

Implications and Conclusions

Importantly, our findings highlight the need for comprehensive training for investigators. That is, investigators not only need

training on sex trafficking, but also in the constellation of other characteristics that may make these youth particularly unique and shape not only their risk for victimization but also how they may respond to investigators when being questioned. Training that is informed by an understanding of adolescent development as well as risk factors owing to their background and history will be beneficial not only to investigators in response to potential trafficking cases but also to other adolescents that come into contact with law enforcement officers.

Training is also needed to better facilitate the successful interviewing of victims and prosecuting these trafficking cases. For one, investigators found that effective ways of overcoming challenges were those that relied on building trust and rapport, maintaining a relationship with victims over time, and providing support and victim assistance. Increasing training and skill development for building rapport, especially with highly reluctant populations, would especially benefit investigators in securing crucial victim disclosures, which prosecutors note influence their decisions regarding whether to prosecute (Farrell et al., 2016). Additionally, law enforcement investigators need to be better informed about the types of evidence that are and are not crucial to the criminal prosecution of trafficking cases to better direct their efforts to the most valuable types of evidence. One investigator highlighted this, stating, "Many times we think we do a good job and hand a 'Silver Platter' case to the prosecutor, only to realize, we did not do our job effectively." Although victim cooperation is important, many successfully prosecuted cases of trafficking and sexual exploitation involve victims who are not cooperative (Quas et al., 2022)—and therefore other types of evidence may need to be prioritized to strengthen the prosecution of trafficking cases without a cooperative victim.

In closing, the present study offers much-needed insight into law enforcement investigators' knowledge and perceptions of adolescent sex trafficking victims and prosecuting traffickers. Overall, investigators in our sample were well-trained and knowledgeable in terms of sex trafficking and interviewing practices, with female investigators found to be more knowledgeable than male investigators. Additionally, investigators were sensitive to empirically supported risk factors related to the minor's background and their conduct during an interview that might be indicative of a trafficking situation. The challenges investigators perceived as the most frequent during the interview process stemmed from the minor's previous experiences with authorities as well as the minor's relationship with their trafficker. Many investigators recognized the value of rapport and relationship-building to effectively surmount these challenges. Finally, investigators reported that the most important factors to successfully prosecute these cases were disclosure from the minor about their trafficker and about other victims and corroborating physical evidence. In all, our findings add to the growing literature on minor trafficking victims and to solidifying an evidence base to properly interview this population.

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(Appendix follows)

Appendix

Percent Correct on Knowledge Questions Regarding Trafficking Situations, Interviewing Best Practices, and Adolescent Behaviors

Knowledge questionnaire items	All	Female investigators	Male investigators
Situations of potential youth sex trafficking			
Over 25% of youth in the US under age 18 who live on the street report exchanging sex for drugs or money [true]	79%	76%	82%
Mild delinquent behaviors, like vaping, act as gateway behaviors that place youth at risk for sex trafficking [false]	54%	64%	51%
Running away, including from home, foster care, or group home, increases the likelihood of a youth being sex trafficked [true]	95%	96%	95%
Transgender youth are a particularly vulnerable population for sex trafficking [true]	72%	91%	63%*
There is higher risk for youth sex trafficking in areas with transient male populations (e.g., military bases, truck stops, convention centers) [true]	83%	80%	85%
Trafficking must involve travel, transfer, or movement of youth across state or national borders [false]	87%	93%	85%
Female sex trafficking victims rarely visit healthcare providers while being trafficked [false]	22%	31%	18%
Removal from home (i.e., living in a foster or group home) because of suspicion or substantiation of maltreatment places an adolescent at risk for sex trafficking [true]	83%	87%	82%
If a youth under the age of 18 consented to having sex in exchange for money or goods, it is <u>not</u> sex trafficking [false]	81%	82%	81%
Involvement with the juvenile justice system does <u>not</u> place youth at higher risk for sex trafficking [false]	63%	73%	61%
Sex trafficked youth may be picked up by law enforcement because they are suspected of committing another [true]	93%	91%	94%
Interviewing suspected youth victims			
Youth are more reluctant to disclose trafficking when they have a prior juvenile justice history than when they do not [true]	64%	67%	61%
Youth who are combative when talking to law enforcement are unlikely to be victims [false]	86%	87%	86%
Some youth do <u>not</u> disclose trafficking because the trafficker is their boyfriend or girlfriend [true]	93%	100%	91%
Having a family member in the room with youth helps them disclose trafficking [false]	89%	98%	86%
Fear of retaliation in youth can reduce their willingness to disclose sex trafficking experiences [true]	97%	96%	98%
Some youth might <u>not</u> tell about their experiences because they get things, like phones or salon visits, from their traffickers [true]	92%	96%	92%
Youth virtually always trauma bond with the trafficker, making it necessary to interrogate them as suspects to find out what has really happened [false]	56%	69%	50%
Victims will tell someone about their experiences once they are separated from their trafficker [false]	29%	33%	26%
Adolescents often lie and falsely claim abuse [false]	60%	73%	55%
It is possible to detect when adolescents are being deceptive [false]	17%	24%	15%
Youth involved in trafficking can react angrily when asked about their experiences [true]	95%	96%	95%
Truly victimized youth will tell a professional about trafficking when directly asked [false]	78%	89%	72%
Youth who provide inconsistent information are more likely to be lying than youth who provide consistent information [false]	51%	73%	41%*
Close-ended (e.g., yes or no) questions can increase how much information youth provide about trafficking [true]	21%	18%	23%
Open ended ("Tell me about . . .") questions are more effective at eliciting details about youth's relationship with a trafficker than their actual trafficking behavior [true]	88%	82%	90%
Being relaxed, warm, and supportive when talking with youth decreases their evasiveness when talking about abuse [true]	94%	98%	92%
Professionals often need to assert authority and control over suspected youth trafficking victims to gain their compliance [false]	74%	78%	73%
Youth are more likely than adults to falsely confess to crimes they did not commit [true]	51%	51%	51%
Adolescent behavior			
It is not until adulthood that individuals can think about the long-term consequences of their actions [false]	32%	22%	36%
Many adolescents experiment sexually [true]	92%	93%	92%
Youth make eye contact with others more frequently than adults [false]	64%	51%	68%
Few adolescents engage in antisocial behavior (e.g., stealing or truancy) during this period of development [true]	36%	24%	43%
Peer relationships can be a risk factor for delinquency [true]	95%	100%	93%
About half of adolescents have tried alcohol by 14 years of age [true]	85%	80%	86%
Adolescents are virtually always more impulsive than adults [false]	17%	18%	18%
Peer pressure can promote positive behaviors in adolescents [true]	87%	82%	89%

Note. Accuracy values reflect correct agreement with a true statement and disagreement with a false statement. Values in the All category include responses from investigators for whom gender was not provided, so the male and female columns may not average to reflect the All column. Asterisks reflect significant gender differences adjusted for multiple comparisons at ($p < .001$).

Received April 18, 2022

Revision received October 26, 2022

Accepted October 27, 2022 ■