

The role of community engagement in preventing child trafficking: A literature review of U.S. Perspectives

Nancy Sibo ¹, Adejo Samuel Egbunu ² and Yvonne Makafui Cudjoe-Mensah ^{3,*}

¹ School of Social Work at Abilene Christian University, USA.

² Department of Family & Consumer Sciences, Alabama A&M University, USA.

³ Department of Sociology, University of Ghana.

World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2025, 26(01), 2949-2953

Publication history: Received on 01 March 2025; revised on 08 April 2025; accepted on 11 April 2025

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2025.26.1.1203>

Abstract

Child trafficking remains a significant issue in the United States, posing a serious threat to children's safety and well-being. This study aims to examine the role of community engagement in preventing child trafficking by analyzing various literature sources. The paper used a literature review approach and explored how community involvement through awareness campaigns, reporting mechanisms, and collaboration with law enforcement effectively contributes to prevention efforts. The findings reveal that active community participation significantly enhances early detection and intervention, reducing the risk of trafficking. Furthermore, community-led initiatives, such as education programs and advocacy groups, play a significant role in empowering individuals to take preventive actions. The study concludes that preventing child trafficking requires a multi-stakeholder approach where communities, in partnership with governmental and non-governmental organizations, work collectively to identify and mitigate risks. Strengthening community awareness and engagement is essential for creating a protective environment for children in the U.S.

Keywords: Community engagement; Prevention; Child trafficking; U.S. Policies; Awareness programs

1. Introduction

Children are both a mandate and a gift from God, deserving respect and protection as members of society. They represent long-term investments in the nation's future, embodying the ideals and continuity of the state. The well-being of children is directly tied to a nation's progress, as they assume strategic roles in sustaining societal values and national development. Therefore, communities must provide children with the broadest opportunities to grow and develop in a secure environment, ensuring their optimal transition into adulthood.

Child protection is an essential component of national development, particularly in strengthening human resources [1]. Despite various preventive measures, multiple factors contribute to children's vulnerability, leading to their exploitation. Child trafficking has become a global crisis, affecting communities across the United States. It is recognized as a transnational and organized crime, occurring both within and across state borders, thereby posing significant threats to human rights, especially those of children.

Child trafficking is often described as the "tip of the iceberg," where only a small portion of cases are visible to law enforcement and the public, during which many remain undetected. Data from 2016 illustrates that 30% of trafficking victims are children, with 23% being girls and 7% boys, while 49% of adult victims are women and 21% are men [2]. In the U.S., reports indicate that trafficked children are predominantly girls, often lured through coercion, deception, or

* Corresponding author: Yvonne Makafui Cudjoe-Mensah

force [2]. These statistics emphasize the urgent need for community-based interventions to address child trafficking at both local and national levels.

Several international legal frameworks aim to combat child trafficking, including the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 2000 Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography [3]. Additionally, the 2017 ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, particularly Women and Children, underscores the global commitment to eradicating trafficking. The International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 182, Article 3, identifies the worst forms of child labor, including [3]:

(a) Practices akin to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage, forced labor, and the recruitment of children for armed conflicts; (b) The exploitation of children for prostitution, pornography, and other sexual purposes; (c) The use of children for illicit activities, such as drug trafficking; (d) Work that endangers the health, safety, or moral development of children.

Preventing child trafficking in the United States requires an integrated approach that actively involves local communities, law enforcement agencies, and social service organizations. Several provisions guide national and community-level responses to trafficking, including directives for governments to [4]:

- Take appropriate national, bilateral, and multilateral steps to prevent the abduction, trade, or trafficking of children for any purpose.
- Protect children from all forms of economic exploitation, sexual exploitation, and abuse.
- Implement strategies to prevent the coercion or deception of children into illegal sexual activities, child prostitution, and child pornography.
- Enhance efforts to reintegrate child trafficking victims by providing psychological, physical, and social support in environments that uphold their dignity and well-being.

There are also instruments issued by the International Labour Organization (ILO) relating to trafficking in persons. The ILO focuses on progress in the labor market toward improving employment and working conditions, recognizing that full-time, productive, and freely chosen employment can reduce vulnerabilities to human trafficking [5]. Additionally, the ILO emphasizes promoting gender equality due to the link between women's employment status, child labor, and trafficking in persons. The organization has issued conventions prohibiting forced labor, migration abuses, trafficking in persons, and slavery, all of which serve as critical tools for preventing child trafficking and ensuring labor protections [6].

In the U.S., community engagement plays a significant role in the early prevention of trafficking in persons, reflecting both moral values and national commitments to combat human trafficking. Since trafficking is a complex issue that is difficult to measure, grassroots prevention efforts are essential to ensuring that child trafficking victims do not continue to increase. Prevention strategies extend beyond government interventions to include national and local community actions, where community organizations, advocacy groups, and social services providers contribute significantly to identifying at-risk individuals, raising awareness, and providing protective services [6].

Recognizing the power of community involvement, U.S.-based initiatives have increasingly focused on collaborative approaches between law enforcement, social services, and the general public to prevent trafficking in persons. Efforts include public awareness campaigns, training programs for educators and healthcare professionals, and direct intervention services for vulnerable populations. The role of society in preventing trafficking in persons is central to comprehensive anti-trafficking efforts, ensuring that early detection and support mechanisms are in place to protect children from exploitation and trafficking [6].

2. Method

The study employs a literature review methodology, also known as library research, which utilizes secondary data sources. Secondary data refers to pre-existing information that is readily available for analysis. Data collection was conducted through an extensive review of scholarly books, academic literature, reports, and policy documents relevant to child trafficking prevention and community engagement in the United States [7]. The sources include textbooks, reference materials, empirical research studies, and international conventions addressing child trafficking. The gathered data is systematically compiled, analyzed, and interpreted to identify key themes and insights. The study employs literature analysis, which involves a comprehensive review and critical examination of published information,

including reports, governmental policies, and media publications related to community-based interventions for preventing child trafficking.

3. Results and Discussion

Preventing child trafficking is the responsibility of both the government and the community. The government collaborates with individuals, organizations, and community groups to stop child trafficking. The community plays a key role in preventing child trafficking by taking action at both individual and collective levels. A proactive and engaged community can make prevention efforts more effective.

Child trafficking involves recruiting, transporting, harboring, or receiving minors for exploitation. This exploitation includes forced labor, slavery, sexual exploitation, forced begging, drug trafficking, illegal adoptions, and arranged marriages. Traffickers often use threats, violence, fraud, or abuse of power to control victims. Many factors contribute to child trafficking, including poverty, social inequality, and cultural influences. These factors are often interconnected, making some children more vulnerable than others. In the U.S., child trafficking is more common in economically disadvantaged areas, post-conflict communities, and regions affected by natural disasters.

Preventing crime before it happens is essential. According to the United Nations (UN), crime prevention involves strategies to reduce crime risks and their harmful effects on individuals and society. Article 9 of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, states that governments should create policies and programs to prevent trafficking and protect victims [8]. Governments should also promote awareness, conduct research, and implement social and economic programs to prevent trafficking [8]. Countries that ratify this convention must take legal action against trafficking.

Crime prevention is more effective than trying to rehabilitate offenders. Prevention is also more cost-effective and manageable [9]. A social approach to child trafficking prevention requires active community involvement. Community members should work together with government agencies, non-profit organizations, and local institutions to stop trafficking. Because child trafficking is both a national and international crime, prevention must be comprehensive and involve community participation at all levels.

Community participation is a process where people actively engage in preventing crime. According to Arnstein, participation involves continuous two-way communication to help people understand the issue. Raising awareness is crucial in preventing child trafficking. This includes public education campaigns, workshops, and training sessions to inform people about the dangers of trafficking. When people understand trafficking, they are more likely to take action. For example, if someone sees a child in suspicious circumstances, they can report it to local authorities. Without proper knowledge, children and parents may unknowingly become victims of trafficking. Providing accurate information is the first level of community participation [10].

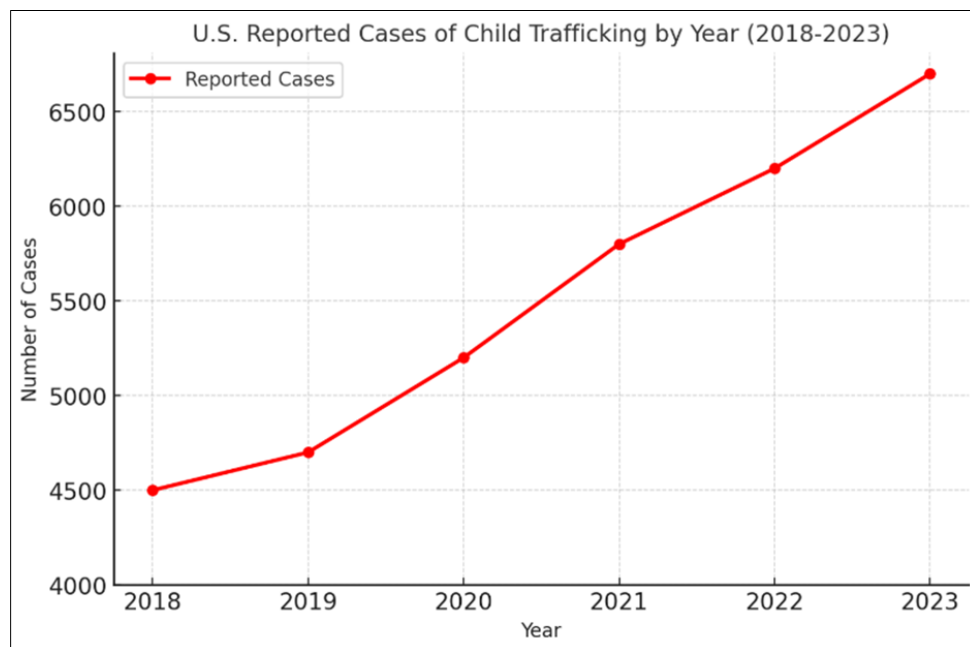
Wilcox's participation theory describes different levels of community involvement. The first level is information-sharing, where people learn about trafficking. The second level is consultation, where community members provide feedback and share ideas about preventing trafficking. The third level is joint decision-making, where people contribute ideas and solutions. The fourth level is taking action, where community members participate in programs and activities to prevent trafficking. The final level is providing resources, such as funding, advice, and other forms of support to help families and children at risk [10, pp. 120-122].

Community crime prevention is an approach that relies on social networks and informal monitoring. Before modern policing, communities were responsible for their safety. However, as communities became less connected, social control weakened, making it easier for trafficking to spread. Strong moral values help communities take responsibility for their safety. The Neighborhood Watch approach is one way to involve the community in preventing crime, including child trafficking [11][12]. This strategy encourages people to work together, monitor their neighborhoods, and report suspicious activities. An active and aware community is essential in preventing child trafficking.

Table 1 Community Engagement Strategies for Preventing Child Trafficking

Strategy	Description
Public Awareness Campaigns	Educating the community through media, workshops, and training.
Neighborhood Watch Programs	Encouraging local groups to monitor and report suspicious activities.
Collaboration with Law Enforcement	Creating partnerships between communities and police to improve response times.
Support Services for At-Risk Children	Providing shelters, counseling, and rehabilitation programs for vulnerable children.
Economic Empowerment Initiatives	Offering vocational training and job opportunities to reduce child exploitation risks.

The comprehensive community engagement strategies outlined in Table 1 present a multi-faceted approach to preventing child trafficking by addressing both awareness and intervention aspects. Public awareness campaigns form the foundation by educating communities about the warning signs and risks, however, neighborhood watch programs create active community surveillance networks that can identify potential trafficking situations. These efforts are strengthened through formal collaboration with law enforcement, establishing key response mechanisms when suspicious activities are detected. The table also highlights the importance of addressing vulnerability factors through support services for at-risk children, thus providing immediate protection and long-term recovery resources. Inferences from the table, the inclusion of economic empowerment initiatives acknowledges that poverty and financial insecurity are root causes of exploitation, demonstrating that effective prevention must address not only the symptoms but also the underlying socioeconomic conditions that make children vulnerable to trafficking in the first place.

**Figure 1** The trend of reported child trafficking cases in the U.S. from 2018 to 2023

The chart illustrates the increasing trend of reported child trafficking cases in the U.S. from 2018 to 2023. Starting at approximately 4,500 cases in 2018, the numbers show a steady rise each year, surpassing 6,500 cases by 2023. The sharpest increases occurred between 2019 and 2021, indicating possible external factors such as economic instability or social disruptions that exacerbated vulnerabilities. This upward trend highlights the urgent need for stronger community engagement, improved law enforcement collaboration, and expanded preventive measures to curb child trafficking effectively. The data reinforces the necessity of awareness campaigns and economic empowerment initiatives to mitigate risks and protect at-risk children.

4. Conclusion

Empirical literature reviews revealed that community engagement plays a vital role in preventing child trafficking in the U.S. Due to the complex and multifaceted nature of child trafficking, an integrated approach involving all sectors of society is essential. Studies indicate that active participation from individuals, local organizations, law enforcement, and policymakers significantly enhances prevention efforts. Community involvement can manifest in various ways, including public awareness campaigns, neighborhood watch programs, and advocacy initiatives. However, for these efforts to be effective, continuous education is necessary to ensure that individuals recognize the warning signs and broader implications of trafficking. Raising awareness fosters a sense of responsibility and collective action, encouraging communities to take proactive steps in safeguarding vulnerable children. Through promoting education, collaboration, and vigilance, communities can serve as a crucial frontline defense against child trafficking, disrupting trafficking networks and protecting at-risk youth.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

References

- [1] Wessells MG. Bottom-up approaches to strengthening child protection systems: Placing children, families, and communities at the center. *Child Abuse Negl.* 2015; 43:8-21.
- [2] Bouché V, Bailey M. The UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons: An aspirational tool with great potential. *The Palgrave International Handbook of Human Trafficking.* 2020;163-176.
- [3] Miskiah S. Community Participation in Preventing Child Trafficking. *Int Conf Community Dev (ICCD 2020).* 2020 Oct;260-263.
- [4] Khan, Z., Kamaluddin, M. R., Meyappan, S., Manap, J., & Rajamanickam, R. (2023). Prevalence, causes and impacts of human trafficking in Asian countries: A scoping review. *F1000Research*, 11, 1021.
- [5] Boufkhed S. Labour exploitation as a social determinant of health: a structured conceptual framework focusing on migrants working in manual low-skilled jobs [doctoral dissertation]. London: London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine; 2020.
- [6] Firmansyah Z. Analysis of the Influence of Age, Education, and Wages on Labor Productivity. *Econ Dev Anal J.* 2015;4(1):91-97.
- [7] Back, S., & LaPrade, J. (2020). Cyber-situational crime prevention and the breadth of cybercrimes among higher education institutions. *International Journal of Cybersecurity Intelligence & Cybercrime*, 3(2), 25-47.
- [8] Simbolon NY, Ablisar M. The prevention of child trafficking crimes and its legal reform. *E3S Web Conf.* 2018; 52:00033.
- [9] **Amdani, Y. (2017).** The Concept of Restorative Justice in the Settlement of Theft Crimes Committed by Children Based on Islamic Law and Acehnese Customary Law. *Al-'Adalah*, 13(1), 81-76.
- [10] Sumaryanti IU, Putera VS, Permana RH, Suhana S. Community-based intervention to promote prevention towards children sexual abuse. 4th Social and Humanities Research Symposium (SoRes 2021). Atlantis Press; 2022 Apr;189-191.
- [11] Nadiroh N, Hasanah U, Yuliani S. Perspective of Community Knowledge and Attitude about Human Trafficking. *Annu Civic Educ Conf (ACEC 2018).* Atlantis Press; 2018 Nov;225-228.
- [12] Okonkwo, F. C., Akonor, B. G., & Adukpo, T. K. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN HEALTHCARE SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT: ENHANCING RESILIENCE AND EFFICIENCY IN US MEDICAL SUPPLY DISTRIBUTION. <https://doi.org/10.36713/epra19901>