



Recommendations for Practitioners Engaged in Antitrafficking Task Forces

An Evaluation of the Enhanced Collaborative Model Task Forces to Combat Human Trafficking

Paige S. Thompson, Evelyn F. McCoy, Jeanette Hussemann, William Adams, Krista White, and Roderick Taylor

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To address human trafficking in the United States, the US Department of Justice funded the Enhanced Collaborative Model (ECM) Task Forces to Combat Human Trafficking program comprising law enforcement officials, prosecutors, victim service providers, and other stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels. These task forces are charged with identifying and investigating labor and sex trafficking cases, delivering critical services to survivors, and prosecuting all forms of human trafficking. With funding from the National Institute of Justice, the Urban Institute conducted a 10-site evaluation of federally funded ECM task forces across the United States. This evaluation sought to (1) understand the impact of the ECM task forces in identifying and assisting survivors and investigating and prosecuting human trafficking cases; (2) analyze differences in task force implementation models (e.g., structure, organization, and key characteristics) to understand which models and features contribute to successful investigations, prosecutions, and service delivery; (3) gain insight into the challenges and barriers task forces face; and (4) understand best practices and recommendations for successfully developing and implementing ECM task forces across the United States. Gleaning from the study's findings, this brief details recommendations in four areas: task force structure, operation, and funding; collaboration among stakeholders; survivor engagement and service provision; and task force training, focus, and activities.

Enhanced Collaborative Model Task Forces

Over the past 20 years, the United States government has taken substantial steps to address human trafficking.¹ In 2000, Congress established the Trafficking Victims Protection Act as a federal response to human trafficking, which focused on a three-“P” framework—*prosecuting* human trafficking cases, *protecting* survivors, and *preventing* trafficking through the mobilization of government agencies to action. Over five subsequent reauthorizations (in 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, and 2018), Congress has built on the Trafficking Victims Protection Act to expand the federal strategy to combat trafficking, including by adding *partnerships* to the initial framework, recognizing the importance of nongovernmental organizations in addressing human trafficking, and funding task forces to address human trafficking in cities, counties, and states (Todres 2012; Zimmerman, Hossain, and Watts 2011).

In 2010, the Office for Victims of Crime and the Bureau of Justice Assistance launched the Enhanced Collaborative Model Task Forces to Combat Human Trafficking program to support communities in developing effective and sustainable multidisciplinary task forces that employ victim-centered approaches to identify survivors of sex and labor trafficking, provide services to survivors, and investigate and prosecute all forms of human trafficking. ECM task forces bring together key stakeholders, including law enforcement, prosecutors, victim service providers, and others at the local, state, and federal levels. As of FY 2020, there were 47 active federally funded ECM task forces in the United States.

Little research on the ECM task forces has been conducted. To address this gap in knowledge, the National Institute of Justice funded the Urban Institute to conduct a multisite, multimethod evaluation to understand the impact of ECM human trafficking task forces on investigating and prosecuting human trafficking crimes and on identifying and assisting human trafficking survivors. The study also sought to examine which task force models and features contribute most to specific outcomes and to gain insight into ECM investigative, prosecutorial, and victim service practices, challenges, and barriers.

This brief summarizes recommendations from this research study in four categories: the structure, operation, and funding of ECM task forces; collaboration among stakeholders; survivor engagement and service provision; and task force training, focus, and activities. Recommendations come from the findings of our analysis and directly from stakeholders’ responses to interview questions about task force recommendations and best practices. See box 1 for our research questions and methodology, and for an overview of the study’s findings, see McCoy and coauthors (2022).

BOX 1

Evaluation of the Enhanced Collaborative Model Task Forces to Combat Human Trafficking

The National Institute of Justice funded the Urban Institute to conduct a multisite, mixed-methods evaluation of the impact of federally funded ECM task forces on addressing human trafficking, including sex and labor trafficking. Specifically, this research sought to (1) understand the impact of the ECM task forces in identifying and assisting human trafficking survivors and investigating and prosecuting human trafficking, and (2) analyze differences in various task force implementation models (e.g., structure, organization, and key characteristics) to understand which task force models and features contribute most to specific outcomes. In addition, this research sought to gain insight into the investigative, prosecutorial, and victim service practices among ECM task forces; challenges and barriers task forces face in addressing human trafficking; and best practices and recommendations to develop and implement successful task forces. Urban, in consultation with the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the National Institute of Justice, selected 10 task forces based on variation in geography, funding cycle, ECM grant purpose area, lead law enforcement organization, and organizational or coverage area. Six major research questions guided this study:

- How are ECM human trafficking task forces providing comprehensive victim services?
- What approaches and techniques are ECM human trafficking task forces relying on to investigate and prosecute cases of human trafficking?
- Which characteristics of human trafficking cases or features of the offense predict case outcomes (such as prosecution)? In addition, how does the presence of certain ECM human trafficking task force elements contribute to those case outcomes?
- What is the impact of ECM human trafficking task forces on addressing human trafficking (in terms of sex and labor trafficking survivors identified and assisted, and cases investigated and prosecuted)?
- Which types of ECM human trafficking task forces perform well and why? Which task force elements (such as task force organization, size, scope, leadership structure, and organizational location) are associated with effective task forces?
- What challenges and barriers are ECM human trafficking task forces facing?

To answer these research questions, we conducted qualitative and quantitative analyses using the following data sources:

In-depth interviews with task force stakeholders. We interviewed 143 task force stakeholders, including 60 law enforcement officials, 23 prosecutors, 55 victim service providers, and 5 other relevant task force stakeholders (county government and communications staff) across the 10 diverse ECM task forces in this study.

Closed case files of law enforcement investigations into human trafficking. We reviewed and coded 226 law enforcement closed case files of investigations identified as human trafficking collected from 8 of the 10 participating ECM task forces. Case files included 257 suspects and 208 survivors. Case files were pulled from a random sample of 30 to 40 cases per task force that spanned the period since the task force began receiving ECM funding.

Data from the Bureau of Justice Assistance's Performance Measurement Tool and the Office for Victims of Crime's Trafficking Information Management System. We received quarterly administrative performance metrics data on law enforcement investigations and prosecutions (from the Performance Measurement Tool) and survivors identified and assisted (from the Trafficking Information Management System).

Structure, Operation, and Funding of ECM Task Forces

ECM task forces should identify administrators to facilitate day-to-day operations. Our research indicated that task forces were more effective when they had administrators, whose responsibilities include helping with day-to-day operations such as monitoring grant budgets and requirements, contact lists, written policies and procedures, training materials, and meeting notes; managing members' expectations and roles; facilitating communication between task force members and organizations; and tracking progress in meeting training, operational, and internal goals.

Encourage colocation of ECM task forces.* Our research found that colocation facilitates collaboration and cooperation, promotes relationship building among task force members, allows problems to be solved in real time, and facilitates investigations and prosecutions. However, colocation is not feasible for all task forces, depending on their structure and coverage area (for instance, colocation is not possible in statewide task forces).

The colocation is key, fundamental. A lot of people like to say we're connected by email, but having people in the same room and knowing that person's face and voice is so very helpful. It makes us much more effective that we can hand information back and forth rapidly since we're in the same office space. It works better this way. You need team members in the same place so that people can interact freely in person. You don't build relationships the same way via the internet that you do in person. —Law enforcement official

Construct a task force that is representative of diverse knowledge and skills. Task forces should have a shared understanding of and approach to human trafficking, but diversity of expertise is critical to effectively meeting goals. Law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and service providers are crucial partners, but task forces also benefit from including nonprofits, advocacy organizations, and other organizations and stakeholders who can engage the community in addressing human trafficking.

Ensure ECM task forces are survivor-informed. It is important that the ECM task forces be survivor-informed. People with lived experience can offer task forces victim-centered and trauma-informed insight to task force practices, including investigation practices and the overall development of task force responses, protocols, and coordination around cases of human trafficking.

Provide statewide task forces additional funding. Because of the significant logistical challenges faced by statewide task forces in meeting essential components of the ECM task force model, such as facilitating collaboration among task force members or agencies from across a state, providing necessary training, and meeting victim services needs across a large geographic area, these task forces should be given special consideration and supplemental funding to put them in position to succeed.

* In this context, colocation means a task force had a common space in one building where task force members from different agencies and organizations (e.g., local law enforcement, federal law enforcement, victim service providers) could embed and work together for part or all of the week on task force activities but could still return to work at their parent organizations as needed. Colocation does not mean that entire agencies or organizations shared one location.

Collaboration among Stakeholders

Clearly define roles and expectations for task force members and organizations to promote collaborative relationships. Task forces should strive to understand each member's roles and view their contributions as valuable for meeting task force goals. Relatedly, task forces should encourage and support rapport and relationship building among task force members to facilitate information sharing and innovation, such as expanding service provision or adopting new investigative techniques.

Encourage open communication among task force members. Task force members should establish formal communication policies that guide members in communicating about cases and service needs and working through conflicts. This is particularly important with law enforcement and victim service providers who may have differing approaches and viewpoints on how to investigate, prosecute, and deliver services.

You need team players. You need people who are open to see outside the small skew of their own agency. You definitely need to have people with innovative ideas. You need to have people who are willing to work long hours to make it happen. You need people from high up who are willing to get their hands dirty on the ground level. You need to be okay with failures. You need to be okay with being able to, like, reach out to other agencies, and just, you know, really just be open, you know, to see what each agency has to offer, and what we can do to come together as a task force. You know? —Service provider

Encourage federal partners to engage more in ECM task force activities and collaborate with local partners. Findings from this study revealed that relationships between local and federal law enforcement partners were not always as strong as they could be because of differing perspectives about the types of human trafficking investigations task forces should focus on and approaches to responding to human trafficking. Although we understand agreement is not possible on all issues, task forces generally perform better when federal partners collaborate with local stakeholders toward a common goal.

Establish formal agreements between participating task force agencies. Task forces should have memorandum-of-understanding agreements that define the roles of the participating agencies and outline the personnel and monetary resources agencies can contribute to task forces. In addition, lead agencies should secure buy-in from their staff to ensure adequate resources can be devoted to the task forces.

Survivor Engagement and Service Provision

Implement trauma-informed and victim-centered practices during law enforcement interviews, investigations, and prosecutions. Law enforcement officials and service providers should collaborate to ensure survivors' basic needs (medical care, food and water, clothes, financial assistance, sleep, safe short-term housing, and safety planning) are met. Law enforcement partners are also encouraged to wear civilian clothes during interviews with survivors and to use survivors' terminology when discussing their victimization experiences. Furthermore, matching the gender of the interviewer with that of the

survivor can help the survivor feel more comfortable. In addition, task forces should consider using “soft rooms” for interviewing and for delivering immediate services. As investigations reach the prosecution stage, law enforcement officials and prosecutors should ensure court procedures and participation requirements or opportunities via testifying and victim impact statements are clearly communicated to survivors.

Encourage close collaboration with service providers during investigations to ensure survivors know their rights and are informed of processes involved in investigation, prosecution, and treatment. Law enforcement officials and prosecutors should engage service providers throughout investigations and prosecutions to ensure survivors understand the process. This collaboration can include participation of service providers in proactive or sting operations, case communication, and court assistance. During investigations, task forces should prepare survivors for what to expect during prosecution or treatment. This can include providing diagrams or photos of courtrooms and treatment facilities, sharing intake forms ahead of time, and assisting and supporting survivors in delivering impact statements.

My interactions with victims are predominantly through social workers. Quite honestly, they keep tabs on the victims. They're making sure that the victims are getting what they need, getting access to services if they need them, getting help navigating their participation in this whole criminal justice system, making sure they interface with me and build rapport with the victim and build trust with the victim, so that if the time comes that we have to try the case and they have to testify...and we know where they are and we can have access to them, that they're taken care of.

—Prosecutor

Provide more resources to increase appropriate housing options for human trafficking survivors. Adequate housing for survivors was consistently identified as an unmet need in almost every task force included in this study. Alternative housing options (such as domestic violence shelters) have been used by some task forces but are not conducive to meeting the specific needs of human trafficking survivors. Housing options that have the capacity (and staff training) to serve human trafficking survivors is needed.²

Encourage ECM task forces to avoid arresting survivors. Task forces should be encouraged to not arrest survivors, which can lead to further trauma, negative interactions with law enforcement, and destabilization for survivors. Additional training on victim-centered and trauma-informed approaches for investigating human trafficking may be needed, as well as training on survivors' perceptions of safety for task forces that rely on arresting and incarcerating survivors as a means of keeping them “safe.”

Task Force Training, Focus, and Activities

Provide opportunities for more targeted and specialized human trafficking training. Task force members wanted more specific and targeted training that focuses on effective investigative and prosecutorial techniques (particularly for labor trafficking). Members of several task forces suggested offering cross-training or immersion training, which would provide opportunities to visit and observe other model task forces in action to identify promising practices.

Giving training. I think that it's incredibly helpful just inasmuch as sitting together. First off, when you're educating others, how much you learn through that process is pretty incredible. Not just yourself, but then you're in front of other people who are sharing information and will ask questions that you then wanna go look up or like, "I don't know. Let me know, go find that out." You get all these resources that you never knew before. More importantly, it's fascinating to sit with someone who's not my teammate. —Service provider

ECM task forces must improve their response to labor trafficking. More resources, infrastructure, and training that focus specifically on labor trafficking are needed. Trainings should focus on building task forces' understanding of labor trafficking and how to identify survivors and high-risk areas and industries for labor trafficking. Skills and expertise should be developed among law enforcement (potentially through working with partner organizations) to gather intelligence about potential labor trafficking victimization in these areas. Task forces should also be encouraged to develop stronger partnerships with regulatory agencies (e.g., the US Department of Labor) to facilitate the identification and prosecution of labor trafficking. For future ECM task force funding decisions, the Office of Justice Programs might consider a bifurcated funding structure, perhaps as a pilot program. For example, the office could fund one or two task forces to focus exclusively on labor trafficking, while other task forces could be funded to address sex trafficking or both types of trafficking.

Encourage ECM task forces to engage in proactive work in communities. Members of four task forces reported that stings or undercover operations were their primary investigative strategies. In addition, a disproportionate number of people arrested for trafficking in this study were Black/African American. Task forces should be encouraged to examine their relationships with communities of color and engage meaningfully with communities in which trafficking is occurring. Task forces should also be encouraged to collaborate with local members and organizations of communities to learn about their needs and to support efforts to identify survivors and to decrease the likelihood of trafficking occurring.

Conclusion

The Office for Victims of Crime and the Bureau of Justice Assistance launched the Enhanced Collaborative Model to Combat Human Trafficking in 2010 to foster a multidisciplinary approach that brought together law enforcement, prosecutors, and victim service providers in communities to work together on a coordinated response to address all forms of human trafficking. Until our recent study, limited research had been conducted regarding the impact and effectiveness of these ECM task forces. We derived several recommendations for ECM task force practitioners from the findings of that study.

First, in terms of structure, ECM task forces should identify task force administrators for day-to-day operations, consider colocating task force members to facilitate collaboration, and ensure membership represents a wide array of knowledge and skill sets while prioritizing survivors' perspectives. Moreover, statewide task forces could benefit from additional funding given the logistical challenges and wide scope of their work. Second, in terms of collaboration, clearly defined roles and expectations via formal agreements as well as open communication will facilitate collaboration and increase effectiveness. Stakeholders recommended that federal partners be more involved in ECM task forces locally.

Third, in terms of survivor engagement and service provision, stakeholders recommended using trauma-informed and victim-centered practices during law enforcement interviews, investigations, and prosecutions in order to better support survivors. In addition, task force members would encourage arrests of survivors to be minimized, because arrests can further traumatize and destabilize survivors; they also recommend that the number of appropriate housing options for survivors be increased. Lastly, in terms of task force focus, stakeholders recommend that more targeted and specialized human trafficking training be provided alongside improved responses to labor trafficking and more proactive work in communities.

Notes

- ¹ The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 defines human trafficking as (1) sex trafficking “in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act was not attained 18 years of age,” or (2) labor trafficking, “recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery” (22 USC § 7102 [2000]).
- ² Notably, the US Department of Justice announced on August 4, 2020, that the Office for Victims of Crime had awarded more than \$35 million in grant funding to 73 organizations to provide housing to human trafficking survivors.

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About the Authors

Paige S. Thompson is a research associate in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where her research focuses on interventions and policies focused on preventing and reducing gun violence, community antiviolence initiatives, responsible fatherhood, human trafficking, and police-community relations.

Evelyn F. McCoy is a senior manager in the Justice Policy Center, where she leads projects on alternatives to incarceration, conditions of confinement, sexual violence in correctional facilities, and survivors’ experiences in the justice system.

Jeanette Hussemann is a former principal research associate in the Justice Policy Center, where she led research on human trafficking and other forms of victimization, access to justice, and experiences in systems of justice and with community-based service provider agencies.

William Adams is a principal research associate in the Justice Policy Center, where he conducts research on the federal criminal justice system, federal sentencing and corrections policies, and the criminal justice system response to human trafficking.

Krista White is a policy program associate in the Justice Policy Center, where her research focuses on victimization, human trafficking, workforce development, and youth alternatives to justice involvement.

Roderick Taylor is a former research analyst in the Justice Policy Center, where he worked on projects related to criminal justice reforms, human trafficking, and victimization. Before joining Urban, he worked at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Institute for Urban Research and Analysis.

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500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024

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