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Press release : 2015 : 05 : 26 : Professor's Research Focuses on Girls with Intellectual Disabilities

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USFSP News

Professor's Research Focuses on Girls with Intellectual Disabilities

Nearly one-third of girls who are exploited in sex trafficking in Tampa and Miami have intellectual disabilities, according to one faculty expert at USF St. Petersburg.

“The percentage of girls with intellectual disabilities among sex trafficking victims was 30 percent, which is significant because only 1-3 percent of the population has an intellectual disability,” said [Dr. Joan Reid](#), assistant professor of Criminology. She recently was invited to speak at the Legislative & Special Initiatives Committee of the [Florida Statewide Council on Human Trafficking](#).

Reid, whose work centers around human trafficking, child abuse, sexual violence and victimology, presented her research on the sex trafficking of girls with intellectual disabilities to the committee during its meeting at the Stetson University College of Law Tampa Law Center. The statistics and information she conveyed to the room of legislative, law enforcement, health, education and social services professionals was based on 100 case file reviews she had conducted from social service agencies in Tampa and Miami.

“It showed it wasn’t just an anomaly of some sort because, in both geographic areas, 30 percent of the girls had intellectual disabilities,” she said.

Florida ranks No. 3 in the nation in human trafficking, according to a 2013 report by the Florida Department of Juvenile. According to a study of U.S. Department of Justice, 83 percent of sex trafficking victims in the nation are U.S. citizens and the average age that a trafficked victim is first used for commercial sex is 12-14.

Reid, a licensed mental health counselor who previously served as the rape crisis counselor in Pinellas County, said that the biggest common denominator for the girls in those files is that nearly all of them were runaways. Other contributing factors that may have led to their endangerment included unsupervised internet access and their willingness to get into vehicles with strangers.

“They’re very vulnerable,” said Reid, adding that girls with intellectual disabilities are more susceptible to suggestion and orders than their peers without disabilities. They also are at greater risk for any of type of sexual victimization because they often do not have any sexual education and therefore may not necessarily understand what is happening and that they are being exploited.

Reid said the perception of sex trafficking victims has been changing over the past several years.

“People just assumed that girls who got involved with illegal, commercial activity were just bad girls,” she said. “Now people are realizing that they are being exploited and manipulated, especially when looking at girls with intellectual disabilities. They have no real conception of what is a boyfriend versus a John who buys sex.”

Reid makes it a point to involve her Criminology students in her research as part of their victimology class assignments. They work with victims and develop prevention materials for girls who are at risk of being exploited by sex trafficking, including those with intellectual disabilities.

The plan is to send those materials, which are based on empirical evidence of traffickers’ schemes and tactics, to social service providers, juvenile justice facilities, and other places where girls may be at risk.

“One of the primary reasons students choose to come to USF St. Petersburg is the opportunity to engage in faculty mentored research”,” said Frank Biafora, dean, College of Arts and Sciences. “Dr. Joan Reid is a prime example of our dedicated faculty who challenges and engages students in and out of the classroom, preparing them for their life’s work through hands-on, real world experience.”



Dr. Joan Reid