

# Challenging the Dominant Frame: The Moderating Impact of Exposure and Knowledge on Perceptions of Sex Trafficking Victimization\*

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*Objective.* Human trafficking problems have largely been framed by political elites and the media as a sexual crime involving innocent victims who are largely women and children. It is unclear how this framing impacts the public's attitudes about the issue. Here, we ask what types of sex trafficking victim frames produce the strongest response among the American public and how does increased exposure and accurate knowledge about the issue moderate the impact of the victim frames? *Methods.* To answer these questions, we utilize data from a unique nationally representative survey experiment fielded to 2,000 Americans in which we designed a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  experiment manipulating the gender, age, and nationality of sex trafficking victims. *Results.* We find the age of the victim has the greatest impact on affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to human trafficking, but that these victim frames are conditional on the amount of exposure a subject has had to the issue of human trafficking and the level of correct knowledge he or she possesses about human trafficking. *Conclusion.* Victim framing in public discourse on sex trafficking does make a difference, and the reasons these frames elicit different responses are complex and moderated by respondents' exposure to information and knowledge about the issue.

Over the past decade, the American public has become increasingly exposed to the issue of sex trafficking, defined in the United States as the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for a commercial sex act through the use of force, fraud, or coercion (TVPA, 2000). Although the exploitation of people for commercial sex has existed in many different forms for centuries, the term sex trafficking was not part of American vernacular until the late 1990s. Since 2000, the U.S. federal government has passed six major pieces of legislation defining and refining sex trafficking crimes and establishing frameworks for anti-trafficking responses across multiple federal agencies (Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, 2000; Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, 2003, 2005; William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Reauthorization Act, 2008; Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, 2013; Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act, 2015).

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SOCIAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY

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DOI: 10.1111/ssqu.12492

Prior to and following the passage of anti-trafficking laws, political elites—including elected officials, the news media, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations—framed sex trafficking in a manner that focused exclusively on certain aspects of the problem and specific types of victims. Sex trafficking has predominately been framed by political elites as the criminal victimization of vulnerable girls from the United States who are held captive by nefarious predators and forced into commercial sex (Gulati, 2011; Kinney, 2015; Marchionni, 2012). As such, political elites have often ignored the experiences of other victims, including men, adult women, and foreign nationals. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people also face increased vulnerability for sex trafficking (Dank et al., 2015), but they are largely absent from public accounts about the problem (Johnston et al., 2015).

Although a growing body of research has examined how the problem of sex trafficking has been framed by political elites and the media, we know little about how the public responds to these various depictions. Because public attitudes and behavior are affected by the way an issue is framed (Riker, 1996; Druckman, 2004), a critical next step in this line of research is examination of the effect of various sex trafficking frames on public perceptions of the problem. Specifically, here we ask what types of sex trafficking victim frames produce the strongest response among the American public and how does increased exposure and accurate knowledge about the issue moderate the impact of the victim frames? We hypothesize that the public will respond most strongly to the sex trafficking victimization frames that have dominated elite discourse of the issue. Further, we hypothesize that the impact of the dominant victim frames will be pronounced among those with high levels of exposure to the issue, reflective of greater predisposition to the dominant frame, but suppressed among those with more accurate knowledge about sex trafficking, reflective of a rejection of the dominant frame. We test these hypotheses using a unique nationally representative survey experiment fielded to 2,000 Americans in which we designed a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  experiment manipulating the gender, age, and nationality of sex trafficking victims. Overall, we find that the age of the victim has the greatest impact on affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to human trafficking, but that these victim frames are conditional on the amount of exposure a subject has had to the issue of human trafficking and the level of correct knowledge he or she possesses about human trafficking.

### *Dominant Sex Trafficking Victimization Frames*

Scholarship on the media framing of sex trafficking victimization has identified three victimization frames that dominate media coverage of the issue: being female, being a minor, and being a U.S. citizen (Kinney, 2015; Johnston, 2014; Gulati, 2011). Each of these dominant frames is discussed below.

***Female Victims.*** Estimates of human trafficking victimization state that 80 percent of victims globally are women and girls who are trafficked for the purpose of commercial sex (UNODC, 2009). Although these figures are notoriously difficult to derive and support (e.g., Kelly, 2002; Laczko and Gramegna, 2003; Tyldum and Brunovskis, 2005), there are several reasons this female victimization frame resonates with the public. First relates to the feminization of global poverty, described as “the burden of poverty borne by women, especially in developing countries” (Chen et al., 2005). With the fall of the Soviet Union

and the subsequent opening up of borders in Eastern Europe, there were serious policy concerns about the ways in which poverty might lead to mass migration toward regions of the world with higher economic growth. Migration was expected to be gendered, with poor women, in particular, seeking economic security for work in typically female labor sectors such as domestic service and childcare (Agustin, 2003). In the migratory process, economically desperate women could fall prey to the schemes of traffickers who take advantage of their vulnerability, defraud them, and force them into commercial sex work (Ruiz, 2013).

The female victim frame also resonates with the public because of longstanding beliefs that women need to be protected. The focus on women in sex trafficking communication “is deeply rooted in assumptions about gender, particularly women’s vulnerability in the migration stream” (Chuang, 2010:1710), which may be “motivated at best by paternalism” (Chuang, 2010:1712). Scholars argue that paternalism frames resonate because they are culturally embedded and harken back to the “white slave trade” of the 19th century, “invoking the paternal state with the obligation to protect gendered victims by punishing evil traffickers” (Cheng, 2011:482). The focus on women is particularly salient in the *U.N. Protocol for the Prevention, Suppression and Punishment of Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*. The U.N. protocol explicitly calls out “women and children” in its title, which scholars argue has the effect of infantilizing women and stripping them of agency and choice (Doezema, 2002, 2010). Therefore, the female victimization frame resonates with the public because it reflects the longstanding cultural idea that women are vulnerable and in need of protection.

The gender bias in sex trafficking communications that tend to either exclude men, or view males as lesser victims, has implications for identifying victims and allocating resources.

The neo-abolitionist focus on sex-sector trafficking of women and children feeds gender-biased approaches to anti-trafficking interventions . . . It has detracted attention from the underreported and underaddressed problems of male trafficking . . . Consequently, exploited women are conceptualized as trafficked, while men subjected to the same abuse are more commonly seen as irregular migrants. This gender bias has negative implications for victim identification. The prevailing orthodoxy of trafficked persons as women and children not only causes law enforcement officials and service providers to overlook male victims of trafficking but also leads trafficked men not to recognize themselves as victims. (Chuang, 2010:1710–11)

It has been noted that the focus on female victims makes male victims “ineligible for public or privately available shelter and protection” (Gallagher and Pearson, 2010:95) in part because “they are either not identified at all, or they are misidentified as illegal migrants, transferred to immigration detention facilities, and eventually deported” (Gallagher and Pearson, 2010:96). The argument, therefore, is that male victims are being overlooked due to the overemphasis in policy and practice on female victimization, not that male sex trafficking victims do not exist.

Despite the presence of male victims, a male victimization frame may not resonate as strongly with the American public because it contradicts societal gender norms and roles. Specifically, it is contrary to the entrenched idea of hegemonic masculinity, which is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee)

the dominant position of men and subordination of women” (Connell, 1995:77). The very idea of male victims of sexual violence creates a type of cognitive dissonance given deeply held notions of male domination, especially with respect to sexual activity. The commonly held belief is that due to issues of power and domination, males are the perpetrators of sexual violence, and females are the victims. When males are victims of sexual violence they are “stripped of their social status as men. They are feminized: made to serve the function and play the role customarily assigned to women as men’s social inferiors” (MacKinnon, 1997:15).

***Minor Victims.*** In addition to the female-dominant victim frame, there is also a minor-dominant frame. Several key factors have contributed to this disproportionate focus on minor victims. First, federal legislation and most state laws are biased in favor of minor victims. They provide an exception to the force, fraud, and coercion requirement for sex trafficking of minors, allowing for lower burden of proof in cases involving minors. Additionally, many states have safe harbor laws, which effectively provide immunity from prosecution for minors engaged prostitution. Additionally, the criminal penalties associated with sex trafficking of a minor are much higher than the penalties associated with sex trafficking of an adult (Bouché, Farrell, and Wittmer, 2016). These legislative disparities create prosecutorial disparities. It is much easier for law enforcement to investigate and prosecute cases of minor sex trafficking, which has led to significantly more prosecutions of minor sex trafficking cases in the United States than any other form of human trafficking (Bouché, Farrell, and Wittmer, 2016). These cases are picked up in the media, and thereby lead to the perception among the public that sex trafficking of minors is more common and a larger problem than other forms of trafficking and other types of victims (Johnston, 2014; Gulati, 2011; Farrell and Fahy, 2009).

A second reason for the minor-dominant victim frame is that victimization of minors more generally is a valance issue. The public consistently expresses concern about the victimization of children and prioritizes state intervention toward the prevention of crimes against children (Best, 1993). With sex trafficking crimes, there is little disagreement that sexually exploited minors lack the ability to consent and therefore are legally presumed as victims (Musto, 2013). This shared understanding of consent does not exist in conversations surrounding adults involved in prostitution; there is an intense debate in feminist, legal, and political circles about what choice and coercion mean in the adult prostitution context (Doezema, 2002; MacKinnon, 2011). Indeed, this debate is evidenced by the State Department’s Trafficking in Persons (TIP) reports under different administrations (see Weitzer, 2015: 228). Under the Bush Administration, the 2005 TIP report said prostitution is “inherently harmful and dehumanizing” (USDS, 2005:6), while the 2010 report under the Obama Administration stated: “Prostitution by willing adults is not human trafficking regardless of whether it is legalized, decriminalized, or criminalized” (USDS, 2010:8). Beyond this, the public in general is not as sympathetic to adult women in prostitution as they are to children who are sexually exploited. Indeed, prostitution of adults has often been dubbed a “victimless” crime. Thus, one way to raise awareness about sex trafficking in a manner that avoids debate and controversy is to focus on those victims that most people agree are victims—minors.

Lastly, many of the anti-trafficking organizations that have sprung up in the last decade to raise awareness and support victims have focused predominantly on minors, which

also facilitates a minor-dominant victim frame. For example, Thorn is an organization that focuses on combating child sexual exploitation by creating technology interventions and disruptions. Shared Hope International's mission statement includes "women and children"; however, the majority of the reports it has produced are specifically focused on minor sex trafficking. And there are hundreds of other organizations that are focused in one specific state or locality that exist to serve minor victims of sex trafficking. The NGO focus on minor sex trafficking may be strategic; given that minor sex trafficking is a valence issue and the most effective concentration of law enforcement efforts, support and funding are likely to be most forthcoming for organizations with a minor sex trafficking mission. This also facilitates a minor-dominant victimization frame.

***American Victims.*** Another dominant victim frame that has taken root in the United States over the past decade is that of American victims. There are several reasons for the American-dominant victim frame. First relates to public opinion about illegal immigration. Immigration/illegal aliens has been ranked among the most important problems facing the United States (Gallup, 2014), and while the public is actually quite divided on whether immigration strengthens the United States (PEW, 2015a) and whether there should be a path to legal status for undocumented immigrants (PEW, 2015b), at least one-third of the public thinks that immigration is bad for the United States (Gallup, 2015). Moreover, 27 percent of the public thinks that undocumented immigrants in the United States should not be allowed to stay, even if they meet certain requirements (PEW, 2015b). This public opposition to undocumented immigrants has been publicly evidenced a number of times, including during the summer of 2014 when protestors chanted "USA" while standing in front of buses that carried undocumented children. Most recently, immigration restrictions and support for the erection of a wall bordering Mexico were prominent campaign issues in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Thus, public opposition to immigrants and specifically undocumented immigrants translates to less sympathy and support for foreign victims of human trafficking in the United States. One strategy to garner support, therefore, is to frame sex trafficking in terms of American victimization.

A second reason for an American-dominant victim frame relates to allocation of government resources for the issue. Research has found that states with larger per capita illegal immigrant populations are significantly less likely to invest state resources in the issue of human trafficking (Wittmer and Bouche, 2013:263). One potential reason for this is the perception that foreign victims of sex trafficking are in the United States illegally, and therefore any government resources allocated to combating human trafficking would indirectly be supporting undocumented immigrants. Wittmer and Bouche (2013) explain:

Other evidence suggested that there was significant concern among some [state] legislators that human trafficking legislation would be used to assist illegal immigrants. A female representative from Ohio recounted a story where one member of her committee declared, "You mean you are going to use state money to protect illegal immigrants?"

This illustrates why there is a strategic advantage to focusing on American victims of sex trafficking; legislators will be more willing to allocate finite government resources to the issue to support American victims of crime rather than foreign victims.

Congressional committee reports produced prior to the 2005 reauthorization of the TVPA clarify efforts of political elites to shift focus to U.S. citizen victims. As stated in House report 109-317, "the United States not only faces an influx of international victims of

sex and labor trafficking, but also has a problem of internal trafficking . . . . New strategies and attention are needed to prevent the victimization of U.S. persons through domestic trafficking” (Finklea, Fernandes-Alcantara, and Siskin, 2011:21–22). Although federal human trafficking funds were originally allocated to support only the identification and restoration of foreign national trafficking victims, language in the TVPA reauthorization bills clarified that human trafficking funds should also be used to investigate sex trafficking crimes involving U.S. citizen victims and victim service funding could support the needs of U.S. citizen sex trafficking victims (see, for example, Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2005).

### *Theoretical Expectations of Dominant Framing Effects*

Framing theory posits that issues can be viewed from multiple perspectives. The perspective one takes toward an issue activates specific values and considerations. As a general matter, literature on framing suggests that frames help the public to conceptualize and categorize an issue by filtering out information in order to emphasize specific aspects of an issue (Iyengar, 1991; Nelson and Kinder, 1996). Since most issues are complicated and multifaceted, the way an issue is framed often delineates how those issues are debated and discussed in the public sphere.

A framing effect occurs when, “in the course of describing an issue or event, a speaker’s emphasis on a subset of potentially relevant considerations causes individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions” (Druckman, 2001:1042). Because the way an issue is framed has a significant impact on public interest in and support for that issue (e.g., Iyengar, 1987; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987), politicians and the media deliberately frame problems to align with particular policy solutions (e.g., Beckett and Sasson, 2004; Kinder and Sanders, 1990, 1996; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley, 1997). The power of framing on public opinion has been exemplified in a number of contexts. Rasinski (1989) found that whether public assistance programs are framed explicitly as “welfare” or as “assistance to the poor” significantly impacts public support for the programs. Another study found that support for punitive crime policies varies given certain criminal frames; respondents exposed to a black criminal are more supportive of the policies than those exposed to a white criminal (Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000).

Although elites may enjoy significant freedom to manipulate public opinion through problem framing (see Kinder and Herzog, 1993; Sniderman and Theriault, 2004; Riker, 1986), scholars have identified numerous limits to framing effects. For example, frames are more readily accepted when they come from sources that are perceived to be credible and trustworthy (Druckman, 2001). Additionally, acceptance of frames may be conditioned by strong predispositions, which increase resistance to information that contradicts existing beliefs (Barker, 2005; Druckman, 2001; Goode and Ben Yahuda, 1994); those frames that reflect preexisting attitudes are generally more effective. Thus, political actors and the media may emphasize particular aspects of a problem that resonate with wider public concerns, tapping into preexisting fears to garner political support.

The dominant victimization frame put forth by anti-trafficking organizations, the media, and government agencies is one that disproportionately highlights young, American females. Reasons for this victimization frame are complex and varied, ranging from deeply rooted cultural paternalism and nativism to strategic considerations regarding raising funds

and allocating scarce government resources. Regardless of the reasons, we hypothesize the following:

*Dominant frame hypothesis:* Respondents who are exposed to the dominant sex trafficking victim frame will report higher levels of concern about sex trafficking, indicate increased willingness to be involved in anti-trafficking activities, and support greater punishment for traffickers than those respondents exposed to alternative frames.

Some have argued that the sensational depiction of sex trafficking victimization has been used to incite a moral panic that would yield increased concern among those repeatedly exposed to the message (Chaung, 2010; Weitzer, 2007). Moral panics are broadly defined as times when “members of societies are subject to intense feelings of concern about a given threat which a sober assessment of the evidence suggests is either nonexistent or considerably less than would be expected from the concrete harm posed by the threat” (Goode and Ben Yahuda, 1994:149). Moral panics can be propagated by grassroots movements, the elite, or interest groups. Thus, the more exposure a person has had to the issue of sex trafficking through media outlets, NGOs, and government agencies—all of which have advanced the dominant victimization frame—the more they may feel the moral panic, leading to intensified feelings of concern. This leads to a second hypothesis.

*Exposure hypothesis:* The impact of the dominant victim frames on concern for sex trafficking, willingness to get involved, and support for tough penalties for traffickers will be heightened among those with more exposure to anti-trafficking media.

On the other hand, research suggests that the impact of the victim frames may be tempered among “competent citizens,” or those who are less impacted by “how an issue or problem is described” and are less impacted by “elite manipulation” (Druckman, 2001:232–33). There are several reasons why “competent citizens” may not be as moved by human trafficking victim frames. First, they have a deeper knowledge about the nuances and complexity of the issue. Second, competent citizens may be less moved by victimization frames because they know that there is a general lack of empirical evidence about the issue (Shafer, 2004). Additionally, those with higher levels of knowledge about human trafficking in general may also be less moved by victimization frames because they have an understanding that such frames may have unintended consequences for populations whose victimization does not fit the stereotype of “innocent” victims, which could lead these subgroups to endure greater state control, arrest, or detention (Kinney, 2015; Srikantiah, 2007). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

*Knowledge hypothesis:* Respondents with more knowledge about human trafficking will be less concerned about sex trafficking victimization, less willing to be involved in anti-trafficking activities, and less supportive of tough penalties for traffickers than those with less accurate knowledge, regardless of the victim frame.

## Empirical Approach

To test these hypotheses, we conducted an original, nationally representative survey experiment with 2,000 Americans.<sup>1</sup> This survey experiment was performed in the spring

<sup>1</sup>The survey instrument and data are available from Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) for replication purposes.

TABLE 1  
Experimental Conditions

	Adult		Minor	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
U.S. citizen	Condition 1	Condition 2	Condition 3	Condition 4
Foreign national	Condition 5	Condition 6	Condition 7	Condition 8

of 2014 by GfK Knowledge Networks, which offers the only probability-based online survey research in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Although there were multiple components to this survey experiment, the one that is pertinent to this project was a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subjects factorial experiment embedded near the end of the survey. Respondents were asked to read a newspaper article that explained how police recently arrested several individuals for their involvement in a sex trafficking ring. They were then randomly assigned to a condition that informed that the ring was involved in the prostitution of *children/adults*, that all of the victims were *foreigners/U.S. citizens*, and that the primary suspect was responsible for recruiting *males/females*. This results in eight conditions, which can be seen in Table 1.<sup>3</sup>

After reading the article, respondents were asked a series of questions designed to gauge affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to the victim frames. We test the impact of the victim frames on subject responses to three questions, which comprise the dependent variables in this study. The first tests the affective response to the victim frame, which asks subjects to report how strongly they agree or disagree on a five-point Likert scale with the statement, "I feel *concerned*." The mean for this variable is 4.19, and 85 percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they were concerned. The second measures the cognitive response to the victim frame, which is operationalized by asking: "After reading this article, how strongly do you agree or disagree that the government should increase the punishment for human traffickers?" Respondents rate their level of agreement with this statement on a five-point Likert scale. The mean for increasing punishment is 4.41, and 87 percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. The last variable measures the behavioral response to the victim frames by asking subjects to report how strongly they agree or disagree on a five-point Likert scale with the statement,

<sup>2</sup>GfK Knowledge Networks is among the most reputable companies in the United States, and has been used by numerous universities, including Harvard University, Stanford University, and the University of California at Berkeley. The process that it uses is called address-based sampling, which includes difficult to survey populations such as those having only cell phones, African Americans, and young adults. Persons in selected households are invited to participate in KnowledgePanel, which is a probability-based panel designed to be statistically representative of the U.S. population. Importantly, GfK provides laptop computers and Internet service connection to any participant who does not already have Internet capabilities. Not surprisingly, GfK has been validated by the American Association of Public Opinion Research.

<sup>3</sup>Experiment wording: Human Trafficking Ring Busted in Burlington, Vermont Associated Press. Police just arrested three individuals for their involvement in a human trafficking ring, which is thought to operate in Burlington and the surrounding areas. Ten victims have been identified, although the total number of victims is thought to be much higher. According to the 10-count indictment, the ring was involved in the prostitution of *children*. All of the victims were *foreigners* recruited from outside of the United States. The primary suspect, Patrick Lloyd, was responsible for recruiting *boys* between the ages of 8 and 15. Although all of the details are still being uncovered, it is alleged that the victims were forced to have sex with upward of 10 people per day. After reading this article, we are interested in hearing how you feel.

“I feel like I want to get involved.” The mean here was 2.99, with only 27 percent of the sample indicating that they agreed or strongly agreed that they want to get involved. The affective and cognitive responses are much less variable than the behavioral response, with many more subjects indicating their concern and desire for increased punishment than a desire to engage behaviorally in the issue of human trafficking.

To test the average treatment effect of the dominant victim frames, we created three sets of dummy variables measuring whether the experimental condition included a *Minor Victim* (coded 0 for adult and 1 for minor), a *Female Victim* (coded 0 for male and 1 for female), or a *U.S. Victim* (coded 0 for foreign and 1 for U.S. citizen).

In addition to the average treatment effect, we also test the average conditional treatment effect of *Exposure* to human trafficking. Respondents were asked about the outlets from which they heard about human trafficking. These outlets included television news programs, advertisements/commercials on television, the Internet, movies, documentaries, newspapers, billboards, radio, public event/workshop, church, friends/family, school, personal experience, community leaders, and political speeches. The exposure variable sums up all of the different outlets where respondents have heard of human trafficking. The variable ranges from 0 (no outlets) to 15 (all outlets). The mean is 3.43 different outlets from which respondents heard about human trafficking.<sup>4</sup> Although this measure is limited in that a person may have a great deal of exposure from only one outlet (e.g., television), we believe increased exposure across a variety of outlets is the most important measure because the dominant victim frames have been advanced across most of the listed outlets, thereby reinforcing the message across a variety of sources.

Finally, we examine the average conditional treatment effect of *Human Trafficking Knowledge*. We operationalize knowledge about human trafficking by asking respondents nine factual questions about human trafficking to which they answer true or false. If they got the factual question correct, we code their response as a 1, if they got it incorrect, we code their response as a 0. We then sum the score across all nine questions so that the scores ranged from no questions correct (0) to all nine questions correct (9).<sup>5</sup> The mean is 4.94 questions answered correctly. Descriptive statistics for all measures can be found in Table 2.

In order to test our first hypothesis we use ANOVA to measure the average treatment effect of the dominant frames on concern, increased punishment, and involvement. Next, we run ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions to examine the independent impact of each experimental condition on respondent concern, increased punishment, and involvement. Finally, to test our last two hypotheses, we run OLS models to examine the conditional effect of exposure to human trafficking and human trafficking knowledge, respectively, on affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses given different victim frames.

<sup>4</sup>Although the specific type of outlet is irrelevant to this study, the top three were television programs, television commercials/advertisements, and the Internet.

<sup>5</sup>Respondents indicated whether or not the following statements were true or false. “Human trafficking requires movement across borders.” “Human trafficking always requires threats of or actual physical harm.” “Human trafficking involves mostly illegal immigrants.” “The vast majority of human trafficking victims are females.” “Human trafficking is a form of slavery.” “Human trafficking is another word for smuggling.” “Pimping a minor is sex trafficking.” “You can’t be trafficked if you knowingly entered the U.S. illegally.” “You can’t be trafficked if you knowingly entered into prostitution.”

TABLE 2  
Variable Descriptions

Variable	Description	Mean	SD
Concerned	1 if strongly disagree and 5 if strongly agree	4.19	0.78
Involved	1 if strongly disagree and 5 if strongly agree	2.99	0.95
Increased punishment for traffickers	1 if strongly disagree and 5 if strongly agree	4.41	0.74
Minor	1 if condition present and 0 if not	0.51	0.50
Female	1 if condition present and 0 if not	0.48	0.50
U.S. victim	1 if condition present and 0 if not	0.51	0.50
Minor female foreign	1 if condition present and 0 if not	0.12	0.33
Minor female U.S.	1 if condition present and 0 if not	0.12	0.33
Minor male foreign	1 if condition present and 0 if not	0.12	0.33
Minor male U.S.	1 if condition present and 0 if not	0.13	0.34
Adult female foreign	1 if condition present and 0 if not	0.12	0.32
Adult female U.S.	1 if condition present and 0 if not	0.12	0.33
Adult male foreign	1 if condition present and 0 if not	0.13	0.33
Adult male U.S.	1 if condition present and 0 if not	0.13	0.33
Respondent female	1 if condition present and 0 if not	0.48	0.49
Respondent white	1 if condition present and 0 if not	0.74	0.43
Respondent age	Continuous, range 19–94	49.48	17.02
Respondent income	Categories, range 1–19	12.47	4.28
Respondent education	Categories, range 1–4	2.94	0.95
Respondent political ideology	Scale, range 1–7	3.84	1.50
Respondent support of women's rights	Scale, range 1–7	5.98	1.80
Respondent exposure to human trafficking	Scale, range 0–15	3.43	2.39
Respondent human trafficking knowledge	Scale, range 0–9	4.94	1.64

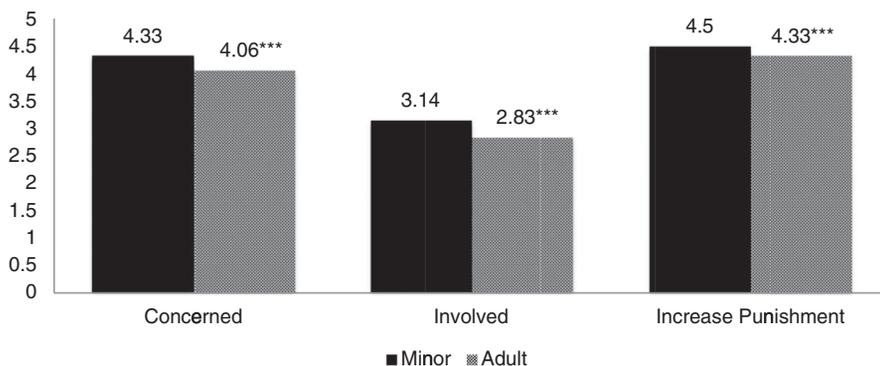
## Results

At the outset of our analysis, we examine variation in the unconditional means of affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses for the different victim frames. To reiterate, Hypothesis 1 predicts that concern will be greatest among those exposed to the dominant human trafficking frames of minor victims, female victims, and U.S. citizen victims, respectively.

We begin our discussion of the results with the minor victimization frame. We found strong support for the effect of minor victim framing on all three dependent variables, including concern, increased punishment for traffickers, and involvement. Respondents were significantly more likely ( $p < 0.01$ ) to be concerned when presented with a minor victim (mean = 4.33) compared to an adult victim (mean = 4.06). There was also a significant difference ( $p < 0.01$ ) in the likelihood to get involved when faced with a minor victim frame (mean = 3.14) versus an adult victim frame (mean = 2.83). Finally, Americans were also significantly more likely to agree that the punishment for a trafficker should be increased for a minor victim (mean = 4.5) versus an adult victim (mean = 4.33). In short,

FIGURE 1

Mean Respondent Reactions Given Minor/Adult Victim Frame



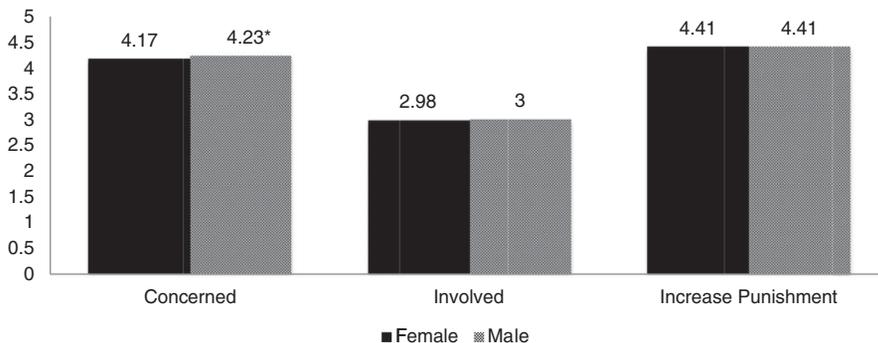
\* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

there is a stronger affective, cognitive, and behavioral response to the minor victim frame than to the adult victims frame (Figure 1).

The results are not as strong for the female/male victim frame. There is no significant difference in cognitive or behavioral responses based on whether the victim was male or female. Subjects are neither more nor less likely to state that they would get more involved or want increased punishment for traffickers given the gender of the victim. However, there is a significant difference in the affective response, but it is not very strong and it is not in the hypothesized direction. Specifically, subjects expressed significantly more concern ( $p < 0.10$ ) for the male victim frame (mean = 4.23) than for the female victim frame (mean = 4.17), which is opposite of that hypothesized. There are several possible explanations for this result. First, it may be the case that concern levels are higher for males because of the “surprise” factor of that frame. A second possible explanation is the societal tendency to value men and masculinity (MacKinnon, 1987, 1993), as evidenced by the gender pay gap, the dearth of women in elective office, and beliefs that males are more competent and hireable (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012). Since men are supposed to hold power positions, it is reasonable to conjecture that the public will feel a greater threat when males are victimized, particularly when that victimization is sexual in nature. In other words, the human trafficking of males may threaten the privileged place that males and masculinity have in the United States. The third explanation for the heightened concern regarding male victims is that a sex trafficking article in which the victim is a male may prime concerns about homosexuality (Sivakumaran, 2005; Stemple, 2005). At a time when the news media is replete with stories of adult males preying on boys for sexual favors (e.g., the Catholic Church sexual abuse scandals and Jerry Sandusky’s sexual abuse scandal), the idea of a male being a victim of sex trafficking invokes thoughts about homosexual sex acts, which the American public finds detestable. Regardless of the potential reason behind this result—which future research should explore more deeply—we find that male victimization frames generate more concern among the public than the dominant female victim frames do (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

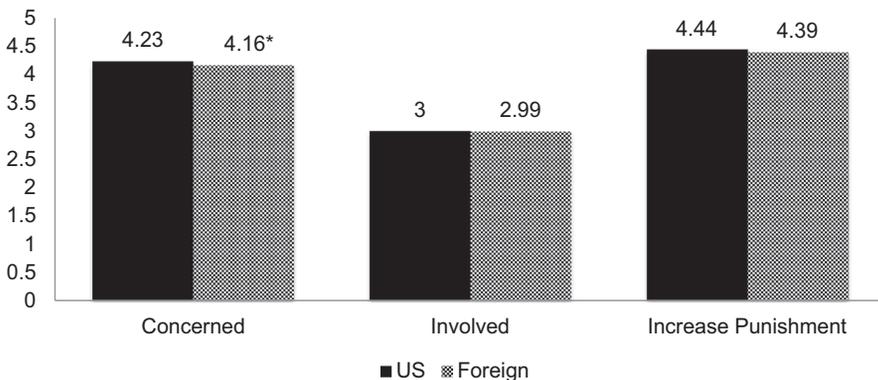
Mean Respondent Reactions Given Female/Male Victim Frame



\* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

FIGURE 3

Mean Respondent Reactions Given U.S./Foreign National Victim Frame



\* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Similarly, the U.S./foreign national victim frames had an affective impact on concern, but no significant cognitive or behavioral impact. There is no statistically significant difference in the likelihood to want to increase criminal penalties of traffickers or get personally involved in the issue of human trafficking based on whether the victim was framed as a U.S. citizen or a foreign national. On the other hand, subjects register significantly more concern about human trafficking ( $p < 0.10$ ) when the victim is a U.S. citizen (mean = 4.23) versus when the victim is a foreign national (mean = 4.16) (Figure 3).

To determine the strength of the framing relationships, we estimated the effect of the unconditional experimental conditions utilizing OLS regression. Table 2 reports the results of this model. We find that, after controlling for all conditions, the frame that evokes the strongest response is that of the minor versus adult victim. Tracking with the ANOVA

TABLE 3

OLS Regression Estimating Respondent Reactions Given Dominant Frames

Variable	Concerned	Involved	Increase Punishment
Female victim frame	-0.07** (0.03)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.00 0.03
Minor victim frame	0.26*** (0.03)	0.31*** (0.04)	0.17*** (0.03)
U.S. victim frame	0.06* (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	0.05* (0.03)
HT exposure	0.04*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)
HT knowledge	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Constant	3.98*** (0.07)	2.58*** (0.09)	4.14*** (0.07)
<i>N</i>	1,909	1,894	1,912
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.04	0.05	0.03

NOTE: Coefficients reported with SEs in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p > 0.01$ .

results above, Americans express significantly more concern, desire to increase criminal penalties, and interest in getting involved in the issue when presented with a minor victim than when presented with an adult victim. The results for the other two dominant frames are mixed. Per the ANOVA results above, Americans express more concern when presented with a male victim than a female victim; however, there is no significant difference in the desire to increase punishment of traffickers or get involved in the issue based on whether the victim is a male or female. Table 3 also reveals that there is slightly more concern for U.S. citizen victims versus the foreign national victims, and there is also a greater desire to increase penalties given a U.S. citizen victim versus a foreign national victim.

Thus far, we find mixed support for the dominant frame hypothesis. Overall, subjects have significantly greater affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses given a minor victim frame than an adult victim frame. Subjects have more affective and cognitive responses with a U.S. citizen victim than with a foreign national, but there is no difference in the behavioral response. However, the findings for gender are opposite of that which was hypothesized in that subjects register a greater affective response toward the male victim frame than the female victim frame, and there is no difference in cognitive or behavioral responses based on the gender frame.

Our second hypothesis predicts that those with more exposure to the issue of human trafficking across multiple outlets will have greater affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses when presented with the dominant frames. Given the results of the ANOVA and OLS models regarding the first hypothesis, we test the second hypothesis only for the minor/adult victim frame. In order to test this, we run an OLS model that includes an interaction term between the adult/minor victim frame and exposure to human trafficking. The results of this model are in Table 3. We find that those with more exposure to human trafficking are significantly more likely than those with less exposure to be concerned, want to get involved, and believe the punishment for traffickers should be increased for both the

FIGURE 4

Moderating Effect of Exposure on Concern Given Minor/Adult Victim Frames

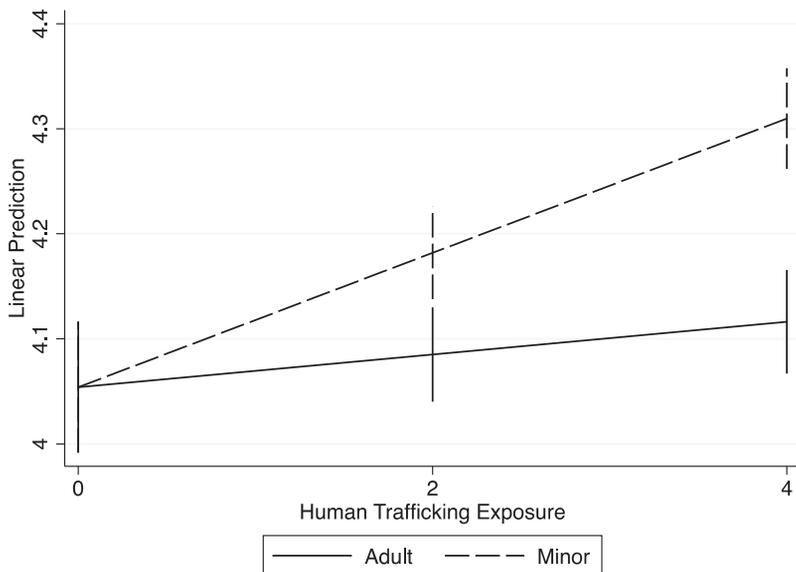


TABLE 4

Moderating Effects of Human Trafficking Exposure Given Minor/Adult Victim Frames

	Concerned	Involved	Increased Punishment
Adult victim × Exposure	0.02* (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.02*** (0.01)
Minor victim × Exposure	0.06*** (0.01)	0.10*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)
HT knowledge	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Constant	4.10*** (0.07)	2.72*** (0.08)	4.25*** (0.06)
N	1,909	1,894	1,912
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.03	0.05	0.03

minor and adult victim frames. However, an examination of the substantive effect of the coefficients for each of the dependent variables reveals that the effect is greater for those who received the minor victim frame. In order to visualize this, Figure 4 shows the conditional impact of exposure given the minor/adult victim frames. The impact of exposure on concern is much greater for the minor victim frame than the adult victim frame, lending support to the second hypothesis that the impact of the victim frame will be exacerbated among those with more exposure to the dominant frame (Table 4).

The third hypothesis suggests that the opposite will hold true for those with a correct understanding of sex trafficking crimes and the range of potential victims. Specifically,

TABLE 5

Moderating Effects of Human Trafficking Knowledge Given Minor/Adult Victim Frames

	Concerned	Involved	Increased Punishment
Adult victim × Knowledge	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Minor victim × Knowledge	0.02 (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)
HT exposure	0.04*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)
Constant	4.10*** (0.07)	2.72*** (0.08)	4.25*** (0.06)
<i>N</i>	1,909	1,894	1,912
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.04	0.05	0.03

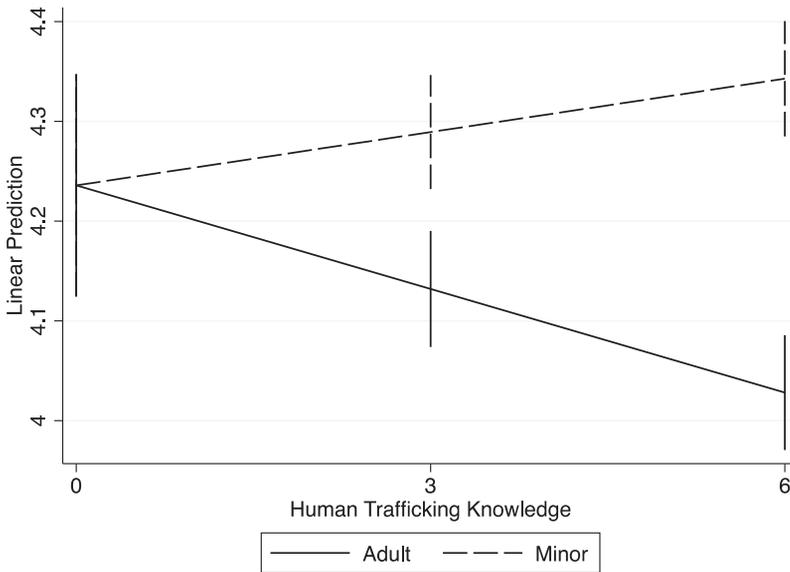
we predict that the impact of dominant victim frames on respondent concern will be negligible among those with more correct knowledge of the issue. One might assume that respondents exposed to human trafficking through more sources of information would have more accurate knowledge of human trafficking, but we find that not to be the case. For respondents in this survey, exposure and human trafficking and correct knowledge about human trafficking are significantly, but negatively, correlated ( $r = -0.17$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ), suggesting they represent different processes through which respondents may understand and evaluate depictions of different human trafficking victims.

That being said, we turn to Table 5. Here, we also test the conditional impact of correct knowledge of human trafficking only given the minor/adult victim frame based on the results from the first hypothesis, which revealed this is the frame that resonates most with the public. We find that the impact of knowledge about human trafficking on affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses is conditional on the victim frame. Those with more accurate knowledge about human trafficking are significantly less concerned and likely to get involved in the issue when presented with an adult victim; there is no significant impact of human trafficking knowledge on desire to increase punishment of traffickers given the adult victim frame. The picture is very different for the minor victim frame. Those with more accurate knowledge about human trafficking are more likely to want to get involved and desire an increased punishment for traffickers when presented with a minor victim frame; but there is no significant difference between those with more or less accurate knowledge given the minor victim frame on level of concern about human trafficking. This suggests that there is affective resilience to the dominant frame among those respondents with more accurate knowledge.

The results for concern can be visualized in Figure 5, which reveals that those with more correct knowledge about human trafficking are neither more nor less likely than those with low levels of knowledge to be concerned when treated with a minor victim frame. However, those with more knowledge are significantly less likely than those with less knowledge to be concerned when presented with an adult victim frame. In other words, the respondents with the least amount of knowledge are more impacted in their levels of concern for adult victims than those with more knowledge.

FIGURE 5

Moderating Effect of Knowledge on Concern Given Minor/Adult Victim Frames



## Discussion

This research builds on a vast body of literature on the ways in which framing impacts public opinion on policy issues. We demonstrate that Americans express different levels of concern based on the framing of a sex trafficking victim. Americans have the most concern, are the most likely to get involved, and seek the most punitive responses when presented with a scenario in which a minor is being sex trafficked. These results are not particularly surprising in light of legislation on sex trafficking, which does not require force, fraud, or coercion to prosecute trafficking of a minor, and the public view of minors as lacking agency/choice, and therefore being true victims (Musto, 2013). In line with our hypothesis, Americans expressed more concern when presented with U.S. citizen victims, though victim citizenship did not impact personal involvement or seeking higher penalties. But contrary to our hypothesis, Americans expressed more concern when presented with male victims compared to female victims. The heightened concern for male victims is potentially due to being surprised when faced with a situation of male sex trafficking victimization or being additionally concerned about males sexually victimizing other males.

Digging further into the results, however, more nuanced trends surface. Importantly, we found victim framing effects were not universal and are conditioned by exposure to the issue and having more correct knowledge about the issue, though in different directions. Exposure (hearing about human trafficking from lots of places) and having accurate knowledge about human trafficking are not synonymous and exert different influences. As predicted, respondents with more exposure to human trafficking expressed more concern overall, and were the most concerned when presented with victims representing the dominant framing, particularly minor victims. If the dominant sex trafficking frame promotes an

inaccurate understanding of human trafficking, as suggested by critics of the anti-trafficking movement (Dozema, 2010; Weitzer, 2007, 2014), exposure to that frame would be anticipated to decrease the accuracy of one's knowledge about sex trafficking problems and make the public more susceptible to accepting the policy solutions suggested by political elites. In line with previous research on moderation of framing effects (Druckman, 2001), we find knowledge promotes resistance to attempts by political elites to frame problems in line with readily available policy responses. Respondents with the most accurate knowledge about human trafficking express more affective resilience to the dominant sex trafficking frame. This finding further supports the notion that framing effects may be limited by both context in which framing occurs and the audience for whom a problem and its associated policy responses are framed.

Additional research is needed to clarify these results. As described earlier, the measure of exposure utilized in the present study is limited to a count of the different sources of information. Future research should identify if particular sources of information promote dominant framing effects or, conversely, advance accurate human trafficking knowledge. For example, it may be the case that documentaries provide more accurate information about human trafficking than television news or feature-length movies and thus the potential benefits of exposure on knowledge, affective and behavioral responses would be conditioned by the source of information exposure. Additionally, future studies should test the extent to which exposure to and knowledge about an issue either exacerbate or suppress the impact of framing effects in other policy areas beyond sex trafficking.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of how sex trafficking is presented as a social problem to the American public. These data make clear that victim framing in public discourse on sex trafficking does make a difference, and that the reasons these frames elicit different responses are complex and moderated by respondents' levels of exposure to information and knowledge about an issue. The findings confirm a strong influence of the dominant anti-trafficking narrative and suggest success of media and advocacy campaigns that rely on inaccurate portrayals of human trafficking victimization to garner public support, in line with theorizing of moral panic scholars (Goode and Ben-Yahuda, 1994). Because politicians and the media deliberately frame problems to align with particular policy solutions (e.g., Beckett and Sasson, 2004; Kinder and Sanders, 1990, 1996; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley, 1997), the minor sex trafficking victim frame reflects a focus of U.S. policy making on the protection of child sex trafficking victims through promotion of safe harbor laws, heightened penalties for those who traffic children, and centralization of anti-trafficking activities within child protection or crimes against children units (Farrell, Owens, and McDevitt, 2014). Despite the dominance of the child sex trafficking frame, there are confirmed cases of human trafficking across a wide spectrum of victim groups, including foreigners and U.S. citizens, males and females, adults and minors (see Zhang, 2012; Barrick et al., 2014). That the effective and behavioral responses of the public vary significantly based on who the victim is raises serious questions about how to proceed in educating the public about trafficking problems. This research confirms that framing sex trafficking as a problem that threatens minors activates affective and behavior responses by the public. As a result, public awareness campaigns intended to advance a broader public understanding of sex trafficking problems must move beyond the utilization of frames that align with the protection of minor victims. The dominant sex trafficking frame clearly promotes affective and behavioral responses from the public, but also entrenches problematic cultural biases that may stymie adoption of more effective sex trafficking policy.

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