

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-555](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Human trafficking—the exploitation of a person typically through force, fraud, or coercion for such purposes as forced labor, involuntary servitude or commercial sex—is occurring in the United States. Congress has passed multiple laws to help ensure punishment of traffickers and protection of victims. DOJ and the Department of Homeland Security lead federal investigations and prosecutions of trafficking crimes. The Departments of Defense, Labor, and State, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission investigate trafficking related offenses under certain circumstances, and take further action, as appropriate. DOJ and HHS award grants to fund victim service programs.

The Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act of 2015 includes a provision for GAO to review law enforcement efforts and grant programs to combat human trafficking and assist victims in the United States. This report discusses (1) federal efforts to assess prevalence of human trafficking (2) challenges agencies face in investigating and prosecuting human trafficking cases, and (3) federal grants and steps taken to prevent duplication. GAO reviewed trafficking data and agency documents, and conducted 32 interviews with federal, state and local law enforcement officials and prosecutors in four jurisdictions. We selected these jurisdictions based on the number of human trafficking tips they received, receipt of human trafficking task force funding and geographic variation. These officials' perspectives cannot be generalized to all jurisdictions but they provide insights into anti-trafficking efforts.

View [GAO-16-555](#). For more information, contact Gretta L. Goodwin on 202-512-8777 or goodwin@gao.gov.

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HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Agencies Have Taken Steps to Assess Prevalence, Address Victim Issues, and Avoid Grant Duplication

What GAO Found

Federal agencies have begun efforts to assess the prevalence of human trafficking in the United States and develop data standards and definitions to help facilitate prevalence studies. For example, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is sponsoring the Human Trafficking Data Collection Project, which seeks to inform the development of an integrated data collection platform regarding human trafficking victimization, establish baseline knowledge of human trafficking and victim needs, and support effective prevention and intervention responses. HHS, in consultation with key stakeholders, has developed draft data fields and definitions for human trafficking and expects to begin piloting the data collection effort in fall 2016. Further, the National Institute of Justice, within the Department of Justice (DOJ), has awarded grants for the development and testing of methodologies that could be used to estimate the prevalence of human trafficking.

Federal, state and local law enforcement officials and prosecutors GAO interviewed reported that investigating and prosecuting human trafficking cases is challenging for multiple reasons, including a lack of victim cooperation, limited availability of services for victims, and difficulty identifying human trafficking. Officials told us that obtaining the victim's cooperation is important because the victim is generally the primary witness and source of evidence; however, obtaining and securing victims' cooperation is difficult, as victims may be unable or unwilling to testify due to distrust of law enforcement or fear of retaliation by the trafficker. According to these officials, victim service programs, such as those that provide mental health and substance abuse services, have helped improve victim cooperation; however, the availability of services is limited. Further, officials reported that identifying and distinguishing human trafficking from other crimes such as prostitution can be challenging. Federal, state, and local agencies have taken or are taking actions to address these challenges, such as increasing the availability of victim services through grants and implementing training and public awareness initiatives.

GAO identified 42 grant programs with awards made in 2014 and 2015 that may be used to combat human trafficking or to assist victims of human trafficking, 15 of which are intended solely for these purposes. Although some overlap exists among these human trafficking grant programs, federal agencies have established processes to help prevent unnecessary duplication. For instance, in response to recommendations in a prior GAO report, DOJ requires grant applicants to identify any federal grants they are currently operating under as well as federal grants for which they have applied. In addition, agencies that participate in the Grantmaking Committee of the Senior Policy Operating Group are encouraged to share grant solicitations and information on proposed grant awards, allowing other agencies to comment on proposed grant awards and determine whether they plan to award funding to the same organization.