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The Rise of Mobile and the Diffusion of Technology-Facilitated Trafficking

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“We are turning the tables on the traffickers. Just as they are now using technology and the Internet to exploit their victims, we are going to harness technology to stop them.”

*—President Barack Obama
Address to the Clinton Global Initiative
September 25, 2012*

In September 2012, President Obama identified human trafficking as one of the great human rights issues of our time, representing a “debasement of our common humanity that tears at the social fabric of our communities, endangers public health, distorts markets, and fuels violence and organized crime.”ⁱ The nature and extent of human trafficking in modern society is complex and evolving, however, and our understanding of the phenomenon is fraught with contested terminologies and differing perceptions. Broadly speaking, human trafficking involves the severe sexual and labor exploitation of vulnerable people for financial gain, which amounts to a gross violation of human rights. Children exploited in the sex trade are especially at risk. What role does technology play in the shifting dynamics of human trafficking today?

In this report, researchers at the USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy (CCLP) reveal how those involved in human trafficking have been quick to adapt to the 21st-century global landscape. While the rapid diffusion of digital technologies such as mobile phones, social networking sites, and the Internet has provided significant benefits to society, new channels and opportunities for exploitation have also emerged. Increasingly, the business of human trafficking is taking place online and over mobile phones. But the same technologies that are being used for trafficking can become a powerful tool to combat trafficking. The precise role that

digital technologies play in human trafficking still remains unclear, however, and a closer examination of the phenomenon is vital to identify and respond to new threats and opportunities.

This investigation indicates that mobile devices and networks have risen in prominence and are now of central importance to the sex trafficking of minors in the United States. While online platforms such as online classifieds and social networking sites remain a potential venue for exploitation, this research suggests that technology-facilitated trafficking is more diffuse and adaptive than initially thought. This report presents a review of current literature, trends, and policies; primary research based on mobile phone data collected from online classified sites; a series of firsthand interviews with law enforcement; and key recommendations to policymakers and stakeholders moving forward.

While the sex trafficking of minors continues to expand across multiple media platforms, our research indicates that the rise of mobile technology may fundamentally transform the trafficking landscape. No other communication technology in history, including the Internet, has been adopted so rapidly around the world.ⁱⁱ The World Bank estimates that 75% of the global population has access to a mobile phone.ⁱⁱⁱ Mobile’s ability to facilitate real-time communication and coordination, unbound by physical location, is also being exploited by traffickers to extend the reach of their illicit activities. Traffickers are able to recruit, advertise, organize, and communicate primarily—or even exclusively—via mobile phone, effectively streamlining their activities and expanding their criminal networks. In short, human traffickers and criminal networks are taking advantage of technology to reach larger audiences and to do illicit business more quickly and efficiently across greater distances.

Mobile communication may also represent a

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breakthrough for interventions by law enforcement and the anti-trafficking community. Data gleaned from cellphones and mobile networks constitute a trail of information and evidence that can be a powerful tool in identifying, tracking, and prosecuting traffickers. Mobile technologies can also be used to reach vulnerable communities and raise public awareness. The rise of mobile has major implications both for the spread of human trafficking and for anti-trafficking efforts, and should be carefully considered by law enforcement, policymakers, and activists as they develop strategies to combat human trafficking in the United States and worldwide. Furthermore, the respect for privacy and civil liberties, and potential unintended consequences of technological interventions on victims and survivors, are crucial considerations in developing mobile-based solutions.

This research expands on CCLP's 2011 report examining the role of online technologies in human trafficking. Key findings of the 2011 report focused on the use of Internet technologies, particularly online classifieds and social media sites, for the sex trafficking of minors in the United States. The USC Information Sciences Institute (ISI) and CCLP collaborated

to develop prototype software designed to detect possible cases of sex trafficking of minors online. Our research indicated that tools such as data mining, mapping, computational linguistics, and advanced analytics could be used by governmental and nongovernmental organizations, law enforcement, academia, and the private sector to further anti-trafficking goals of prevention, protection, and prosecution.

The CCLP Technology & Trafficking Initiative was launched in June 2010 in coordination with Alec Ross, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's senior adviser for innovation, and Ambassador Luis CdeBaca, head of the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. Both Ross and CdeBaca have stressed the need for increased information and understanding of the role of technology in trafficking. International fieldwork conducted by the CCLP research team in Cambodia, Haiti, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Vietnam has provided further evidence of the potential to harness information technology for counter-trafficking efforts.

Domestically, CCLP has convened a series of meetings with U.S. leaders from law enforcement, government, private technology firms, nongovernmental organizations, and academia to explore the online trafficking landscape. For example, in November 2011, CCLP and California Attorney General Kamala Harris' office co-hosted a multi-sector meeting to develop partnerships and policy recommendations around technology and trafficking issues. Since the launch of CCLP's Technology & Trafficking Initiative in 2010, there has been commendable progress in increasing attention to and understanding of technology's role in trafficking across sectors. However, many questions remain unanswered, and continued evidence-based research is required to fully comprehend the problem and design pragmatic, effective solutions.

The growing awareness of technology's central role in human trafficking is an important step forward, but technological development is prone to constant and rapid evolution. In order to keep pace with the ongoing transformation of the trafficking landscape, counter-trafficking responses will need to maintain constant vigilance and adopt mobile technology as a central tool within a comprehensive strategy. Looking ahead to President Obama's second term in office, we urge the White House to build on his commitment to "turn the tables" on traffickers, and continue to be a leader in innovative solutions.

As human trafficking, and many of today's most pressing social issues, become increasingly mediated by technologies, the negative and positive dimensions of technology's impact on social change and human rights must become vital considerations.