



THE BENEFITS OF SMART RAIDS VS. BLIND SWEEPS

Law enforcement raids are most effective when they involve good intelligence and planning; these factors are critical to fighting modern slavery. While no operation will have the benefit of perfect information, a high degree of certainty that trafficking victims are present in labor and commercial sex sites is essential before mounting an operation. Victim information is usually obtained in advance through the accounts of escaped or rescued victims by law enforcement agents working undercover or through strategically recruited informants.

“Smart” raids free trafficking victims while minimizing harm to others. They are based on real evidence, have a well defined goal grounded in anti-trafficking laws, and are well planned to ensure the safety of individuals. They should include arrangements to segregate traffickers from victims, to conduct victim-centered interviews, to cross-reference victims’ accounts, and to quickly transition to post-rescue care and shelter for identified victims.

On the other hand, some raids are “blind,” executed against a target without adequate attempts to verify the presence of trafficking victims in those locations. They are based on assumptions, or are simply round-ups of prostituted people meant to “clean out” a red-light district. They often do not have an anti-trafficking legal framework or any evidentiary basis driving them, and do not include victim identification processes. Blind raids can lead to poor results while harming both victims and those not involved in human trafficking.

Officers often become disheartened after such unsuccessful raids, especially if they naively assumed exploited people would be found enthusiastically awaiting liberation. Bad experiences with blind raids can lead to diminished efforts to find and raid sites where labor or sex trafficking is in fact taking place, or can lead to cynicism or apathy about the crime in general among government officials and members of civil society. Even when trafficking victims are found, a poorly planned raid can make it difficult to gather evidence and mount effective prosecutions to ensure that traffickers serve significant time behind bars.

Identifying Victims of Trafficking

Because physical and psychological violence and intimidation are methods of coercion that are often employed by traffickers, trafficked persons are often reluctant to identify themselves as victims. Indeed, they may not realize they are victims of a crime. Victims are usually taught by their abusers to fear law enforcement authorities and NGOs. If victims are underage, they are often coerced by traffickers and brothel keepers to claim they are adults consensually involved in prostitution. Adult trafficking victims may have been threatened in order to keep them from revealing any indicators of trafficking such as involuntary confinement, debt bondage, or threats of violence against them and their families. Labor managers and pimps often threaten victims or their relatives with future harm if they tell the truth to authorities.



Suspected victims must be removed from the site of exploitation – a threatening environment – and taken to a safe place. Bosses, pimps, and guards should be identified and segregated, lest they threaten the victims or intimidate them by their mere presence. Governments need to assume temporary custody of suspected trafficked persons, and view them as victims or witnesses of serious crimes. Victims of human trafficking are more likely to reveal at least a portion of their true situations when they are interviewed in a non-confrontational setting. The true ages of victims can be learned through self-reporting or consensual medical examinations. Police and social counselors need time to interview and counsel suspected victims. This counseling period, ranging from a few days to two weeks, should become a standard practice in countries with significant trafficking problems. The trauma associated with human trafficking means that victims can be defensive, hostile, and reluctant to share the painful details of their experiences. Once a person's status as a victim of trafficking has been determined, the opportunity for long-term care must be offered to facilitate rehabilitation, though victims should not be pressured to accept such assistance.

Children Used for Commercial Sex

The United States' policy on children (under the age of 18) used for commercial sex is unambiguous: they must be removed from exploitation as soon as they are found. The prohibition on use of children in the commercial sex trade is

set out in both U.S. law and international treaty. There can be no exceptions, no claim of cultural traditions, and no socio-economic rationalizations to prevent the rescue of children from sexual servitude. Law enforcement must take particular care to identify minors in the process of smart raids and ensure their safety.

NGO Involvement

NGOs can play an essential role in smart raids. They often help law enforcement officers carry out rescues and provide comfort and shelter to victims. They can offer psychosocial counseling skills to help identify trafficking victims, usually after they are removed from trafficking situations.

NGOs and media representatives can also play a valuable role by holding governments accountable to enforce legal standards and deliver victim care. However, NGOs cannot be expected to take the place of government in the commission of a raid or rescue, as they lack authority to perform law enforcement actions. Furthermore, NGOs and the media should avoid any practices harmful to the rights of children or others. While media coverage of raids may be attractive as a public relations tool, it is an invasion of victims' privacy and puts them at risk.

