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In Their Own Words: The Impact of Indirect Trauma Exposure on Judges Presiding Over Cases Involving Minors Involved in Sex Trafficking

By Ginny Sprang, Jennifer Cole, and Christine Leistner

ABSTRACT

Though secondary traumatic stress has been researched extensively among professionals working with youth in diverse professions, there is limited information about judicial experiences working with trafficked youth. This qualitative study involves 82 interviews with juvenile and family court judges to understand the impact of indirect trauma exposure. Over 80% of respondents describe symptoms of secondary traumatic stress and countertransference responses. Notably, 20% with these symptoms also reported increased professional pride in their role performance

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with these cases. Implications for how judges can address the effects of indirect exposure are offered based on the literature and the recommendations of the respondents.

Key words: secondary traumatic stress, child sex trafficking, judicial perspectives, secondary trauma.

In 2019, there were 14,597 documented victims of sex trafficking in the United States (US), many of which were currently minors or under 18 years of age when they were first exposed to sexual exploitation (Polaris Project, 2019). Given that the majority (77%) of minors who have experienced sex trafficking report that they were victimized within their home country (Anderson, 2020), sex trafficking of minors is a significant domestic issue for the US. Historically, the US judicial system has treated children involved in commercial sex as delinquents resulting in punishment such as detention (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges NCJFCJ, 2019). Over the past several years this perspective has shifted to treating these children as sex trafficking victims with the development of specialty courts and more training for judges to offer trauma-centered approaches (NCJFCJ, 2019). To date, there are comprehensive reports outlining trauma-responsive recommendations for judges to better serve these children (e.g., NCJFCJ, 2019; Cole & Sprang, 2020). However, little research has examined judges' experiences of being repetitively exposed to traumatic histories of youth that have experienced sex trafficking. Though this concept of secondary trauma has been researched extensively in the context of other professionals working with youth with a variety of trauma backgrounds (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Rienks, 2020), we have little information about judges' experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the perspectives of family and juvenile court judges in the US in terms of secondary trauma when adjudicating cases of youth involved in commercial sex.

Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States

Though it is difficult to find comprehensive information about child sex trafficking in the US, one study using a nationally representative sample of adolescents reported that 3.5% have exchanged sex for drugs or money (Edwards et al., 2006). A more recent study examining a nationally representative sample of children involved in the welfare system found that 38 out of 814 (4.7%) youth were paid for engaging in sexual activity with someone within six months of data collection (O'Brien et al., 2017). These children likely have complex trauma histories that may include unstable family lives and living environments, abuse, neglect, overall household dysfunction and running away from home (Choi, 2015; Goldberg et al., 2016; Sprang & Cole, 2018). However, the experience of being sexually exploited may be a distinctive experience in addition to these other traumatic events in the child's life. When comparing children who have experienced sex trafficking to other "high risk" children (e.g., those in foster care, runaways, and those with juvenile convictions), children who

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experienced sex trafficking have significantly higher levels of mental health disorder symptomology in multiple domains, are less likely to be in school, and are more likely to experience kidnapping and multiple forms of abuse by a non-family member (Cole, Sprang, Lee & Cohen, 2016; Kenny et al., 2020; Palines et al. 2020). Therefore, working with these children may present unique challenges for professionals in the community trying to protect and support them and making decisions that will likely impact their lives in substantial ways.

Secondary Traumatic Stress and Countertransference Among Service Providers

Secondary trauma refers to the psychological and behavioral effects of direct, regular exposure to accounts of trauma experienced by the individuals that professionals serve in a working environment (Jaffe et al., 2003; Osofsky et al., 2008). This secondary (or vicarious) trauma may result in a variety of symptoms of secondary traumatic stress such as anger, apathy, withdrawal, anxiety and sleep disturbances (Administration for Children & Families [ACF], 2020). Although previous research has used compassion fatigue to describe these PTSD-like symptoms (e.g., Craig & Sprang, 2010), the current study will refer to this symptomology as secondary traumatic stress (STS). Additionally, in previous research, countertransference has been considered a symptom of STS, however as Berzoff and Kita (2010) suggest, this concept is considered distinctive in the current study. Countertransference is a term that describes the therapist's unconscious (and often conscious) reactions to the patient (American Psychological Association, 2020). Countertransference is a reaction that providers have to others that is not necessarily trauma related, but can hinder a professional relationship if there is over-identification, and/or likely unresolved personal issues experienced by the service provider that are activated by the encounter (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Sprang, 2020; Berzoff & Kita, 2010). Although these countertransference reactions may be either positive or negative, facilitative or nonfacilitative, it represents a pathway where the experience of the other can evoke strong feelings in the professional (Watkins, 1985). Berzoff and Kita (2010) also offer two distinctly different treatments for each of these issues that service providers may require including self-care and/or trauma treatment for STS, and professional assistance (supervision or therapy) to recognize and address countertransference.

Research examining risk factors for STS among service providers suggests that personal trauma background, social support, trauma-responsive training, use of evidence-based practices and years working with trauma survivors may influence the severity of STS that professionals are likely to experience (Bride, 2007; Craig & Sprang, 2010; Schafhauser et al., 2015). There has been extensive research conducted about STS among professionals working with trauma survivors in multiple disciplines including social work and counseling psychology (Armes et al., 2020; Sprang, Clark & Craig, 2011; Rienks, 2020).

Among a national sample of clinical social workers ($N = 539$), STS was associated with the amount of trauma survivors on their caseload, the amount of time spent discussing clients' traumatic experiences, and the percentage of their caseload that was spent

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working with children (Armes et al., 2020). This research suggests that working closely with children and being exposed to their traumatic experiences may be related to the likelihood of developing STS symptoms. Among child welfare caseworkers, nearly 30% of the sample ($N = 1968$) reported severe STS symptoms and 27% reported moderate to high symptoms (Rienks, 2020). Thinking about clients unintentionally and sleep trouble were the two most commonly cited STS symptoms in the study (Rienks, 2020). In another study with child protection staff, 50% experienced high levels of STS but fewer reported high levels of burnout (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006). At the time of data collection, these individuals were participating in a secondary trauma seminar and also reported high levels of work fulfillment, which the authors suggested could buffer against the stress of secondary trauma on burnout (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006). There is a paucity of research that examines secondary traumatic stress and/or countertransference in health or mental health providers who work specifically with trafficking victims. Those that appear in the literature involve very small samples of less than twenty (Nelson, 2016; Von Wiegand, 2020; Rameriz, Gordon, Reissinger et al., 2020), and/or address only related concepts such as burnout or medical professionalism (Pyo & Choi, 2014; Kilner & Stroud, 2012). One study that examined secondary traumatic stress in professionals who work with refugees who had been sexually exploited during the immigration process noted that providers in the study reported at least occasionally having trouble sleeping (58%), having intrusive thoughts (77.5%), having trouble concentrating (51.7%), and expressed shock, sadness and frustration at the perilousness of their circumstances (Lusk & Terraza, 2015).

There are even fewer studies investigating the role of STS among judges. This is surprising given that judges are encouraged to build trust with youth and, in many cases, are required to learn about their trauma histories (NCJFCJ, 2019). One preliminary study that surveyed 105 civil, criminal and juvenile court judges (Jaffe et al., 2003) reported that 63% experienced one or more symptom of STS and the most commonly cited symptoms were sleep disturbances (17%) and intolerance of others (11%). However, the majority of these judges (73%) also reported at least one coping strategy including personal coping (e.g., physical activity, rest), professional coping (e.g., workshops and peer support), and societal coping (e.g., coordinating court and community services). It is likely that some of these coping strategies (e.g., professional [trauma-based] workshops) promote higher levels of compassion satisfaction in their work although this has not been directly tested for judges specifically. Osofsky, Putnam & Lederman's (2008) study (N=45) of U.S. judges did not measure secondary traumatic stress per se, but noted that judges reported feeling overwhelmed by the prevalence of trauma in the courtroom, the scope and intensity of the needs of youth, the inadequacy of resources and placement options, and difficulties coordinating with other systems of care.

Compassion Satisfaction

Compassion satisfaction is a term used to describe feeling a sense of pride and meaning in the work that professionals engage in with trauma survivors (Conrad &

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Kellar-Guenther, 2006). When professionals experience compassion satisfaction they feel as though they are making a difference in the lives of others (Craig & Sprang, 2010). When professionals working with trauma survivors have higher rates of compassion satisfaction, they have lower rates of STS symptoms including compassion fatigue and burnout (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Ray, Wong, White et al., 2013).

In a nationally representative sample of social work and counseling professionals, individuals with training in trauma had lower burnout and higher compassion satisfaction than those without this specialized training (Craig & Sprang, 2010). In addition, those who used evidence-based practices had lower levels of burnout and higher levels of compassion satisfaction (Craig & Sprang, 2010). These findings speak to the need for specialized training that helps guide professionals to work with victims of trauma more effectively to reduce the negative consequences of repetitive secondary trauma exposure. This may be particularly true for service providers working with victims of sex trafficking given that some report this work to be particularly challenging in comparison to working with other vulnerable populations (Kliner & Stroud, 2012).

Role of Judges in Addressing Child Sex Trafficking

In a comprehensive report about the role of judges in protecting children involved in commercial sex, the NCJFCJ (2019) conducted interviews with judges in rural and urban jurisdictions across the US to understand the activities judges are or can be involved in to support these children. Suggestions included establishing trust with victims, identifying risk factors, implementing child trafficking and other related screening tools, monitoring cases to safeguard access to support services, and to ensure that other professionals working with these children are utilizing trauma-responsive practices. To build trust, judges must be aware of the child's background and history and spend time getting to know the child and to engage in community work to determine the scope of child sex trafficking in their communities and collaborate with other professionals working for the well-being of these children, including counselors, law enforcement, and child welfare professionals (NCJFCJ, 2019).

Therefore, the current recommendations include being aware of the extent of CST in the community and learning details of the full trauma histories of victimized children in the community. As such, this work likely exposes judges to secondary trauma in the same way that child welfare and medical professionals are exposed to secondary trauma. The NCJFCJ (2019) includes a small section in the report that recommends judges have training in secondary trauma and access to resources that may help manage this secondary trauma effectively. However, there are currently no studies examining STS or other experiences among judges who adjudicate cases involving minors engaged in commercial sex. Therefore, the aim of the current study is to conduct an exploratory study interviewing family and juvenile court judges across the US to understand their emotional experiences working with children engaged in commercial sex.

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METHODS

Procedure

The participants in this study included 82 juvenile and family court judges working in the United States court system during the time of participation in the study. Judicial attendees at national conferences held during 2016 and 2017 were recruited through flyers and announcements during the proceedings, and were alerted to the study via email and mailed invitations prior to the conference with scheduling options for interviews during the event. An interview booth/location was established at each conference venue to conduct the 30 - 45 minute-interviews. Following a snowball method of data collection, judges were given the option of nominating eligible colleagues for participation in the study. Additionally, researchers contacted judges or their assistants by phone or email inviting participation in the study using publicly available, state-level listings of juvenile and family court judges. Real-time geocoding allowed researchers to track geographic representation in the study so that efforts could be taken to target underrepresented areas of the country as the interviewing process evolved.

All judges were interviewed in-person or by phone following an IRB approved protocol. Participants were oriented to the study and allowed to review and sign informed consent documents following a review of the study procedures, benefits and risks, or in the case of telephone interviews, give verbal consent. Responses to interview questions were recorded by the interviewer and then transcribed by a research assistant into a data template that was then uploaded into NVivo qualitative analysis software. All data was stored on a secured electronic folder with access given only to the researchers involved in the study.

Measures

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed that included 27 interview questions on the following topics: knowledge and perspectives of Safe Harbor laws specific to their state or jurisdiction, their process for decision-making in cases involving youth involved in commercial sex, access to case-relevant information and resources, perceptions of legal issues and barriers, community-specific issues, knowledge of innovations related to court cases with youth involved in commercial sex, information regarding judges' willingness to participate in training related to sex trafficking of minors, and the personal impact of the work. Due to the volume of information received, this study focuses specifically on a subset of questions that were presented to the respondents during the interview, including: "Do you find the cases involving juveniles who are involved in commercial sex bring up challenging emotions for you? What kinds of emotions, and why do you think this occurs?" Interviewers gave judges broad agency to define these impacts in a manner that was meaningful to them and did not probe for any specific response clusters as themes were not decided a priori.

Each interview included questions regarding the respondent's age (30-39; 40-49; 50-59; 60 or older), sex (male, female, other), race (Caucasian, Black, Asian, Native

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American/Alaskan Native, Other), ethnicity (Hispanic/NonHispanic), number of years serving in specific court systems (e.g., juvenile, family, civil, criminal, drug), and current caseload (number of cases per week, month year, converted to weekly unit). The state and counties of jurisdiction were collected to guide ongoing sampling targets.

Data Analyses

The qualitative analysis was conducted using NVivo 11 and followed a phased, sequential approach (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Initially, the lead author drafted a series of preliminary codes following a review of all interview responses. These preliminary themes were used by a team of three researchers (including the lead author) to code a random sample of 20 interviews, adding additional nodes, creating memos to capture the rationale for each new node that emerged, and the assumptions associated with decision-making. After this step, interrater reliability between the three coders was .89, indicating excellent agreement (Cohen, 1960). The next phase was to convene the coders to discuss areas of convergence/divergence, the rationale for the new nodes, and to reach consensus about the conceptual difference between the themes that were emerging from the data. What followed was a refinement stage where each coder was assigned 25-30 interviews to analyze separately. At this step, each researcher used the established nodes to categorize the data but was permitted to identify additional themes, categories, and subcategories that emerged. Another meeting of the researchers was called and discussions about new themes or subthemes were discussed until consensus was reached on the final coding protocol (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). A random sample of 10% of these cases selected and coded by the lead author, which yielded an interrater reliability coefficient of .94. In the final step, the interviews were coded until each interview had been analyzed by two coders. The following results reflect the outcome of this process.

RESULTS

The respondent pool reflected a balance by sex with 52.4% of participants self-identifying as female. Over two-thirds of judges were White, non-Hispanic (68.3%), while 18.3% self-identified as African American/Black, 11.0% identified as Hispanic, and 2.4% identified as Native American or Alaskan Native. The majority of judges were 50 years of age or older (44.4% were ages 50-59, and 32.1% were ages 60 or older), and 22.2% were between the ages of 40-49, just over 1% were younger than 40. The judges represented geographically diverse regions of the country, presiding over courts in 30 states plus the District of Columbia. Their jurisdictions covered all regions of the contiguous United States, representing large metropolitan areas with population over a million (50.5%), small metropolitan areas with populations less than a million (27.8%), and micropolitan, tribal and rural areas (6.2%). Since sex trafficking cases appear in more than one court setting, judges were queried about court-type so context could be

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understood. In this sample, 28.1% presided over family court; 40.2% over juvenile court, 28.1% report combined juvenile/family court responsibilities, and 3.7% presided over adult criminal court but had prior juvenile and/or family court involvement. Across all settings, judges had an average of over 10 years of judicial experience, and 68% worked in a state that had a Safe Harbor Law or equivalent.

Qualitative Analysis

The majority of judges (66 out of 82) report being distressed by their experiences with CSEC (commercial sexual exploitation of children) cases, and described these effects in terms of secondary traumatic stress (trauma symptoms based on indirect exposure such as nightmares, intrusive thoughts, mood disturbance), and countertransference issues (feeling paternalistic/maternalistic, thinking about their own children/grandchildren).

Secondary Traumatic Stress responses were mentioned either descriptively or phenomenologically by 36 of the 82 respondents. The most predominate STS symptoms mentioned were intrusive thoughts, physical distress, sleep disturbance and ruminations. Several judges described sleep disturbance due to ruminations, explaining "*All are challenging, child abuse, neglect, all of them. Impact on my staff, everyone is very stressed. My case load is lighter than anywhere else in the state, and I cannot sleep because I am thinking, thinking about them*." Others added, "*to see to what level they have been broken. . .that keeps me up at night*" and "*Sometimes I worry about these cases more than I should. They keep me from sleeping*." Another judge stated "*How could a 12 year old be missing for 2 months and no one is looking for her? Very distressing case! {I} have nightmares about this one*."

Other judges spoke of secondary traumatic stress as common reaction, and described widespread impact of indirect exposure in their professional circles. For example, one judge remarked, *"If other judges don't think these cases bring up challenging emotions they need to get out of this business." "Vicarious trauma is very real." "More exposed you are the more it causes physical issues." "{I} start to second guess decision making*." Another judge states "*Absolutely." "Listening to stories wears on you." "These kids are more complex than any other kids." "It can be an emotional roller coaster, but you have to keep a straight face and do your job." "Secondary trauma definitely happens."* Identifying and acknowledging STS is *"really important*."

Judges, who acknowledge the weight of decision-making in these complex cases, identified strong emotions. Remarks such as "*Anger right away. Just a lot of anxiety in deciding future of child. Will likely be permanently damaging. Wonder how the case turned out years later."* Also, *"Frustration, hopelessness, depression. The challenge to find community resources and the lack of services through child welfare is a great source of frustration*."

One judge's description of personal impact reflects the violent and traumatic nature of commercial sex trafficking of minors: "*Definitely for me. My guess is it brings up emotions for 10 out of 10 family judges here. You try to get the kids services and have to wait too long. The emotions come from the failures of the system. Being on the bench - it's like getting shot with an AK47 for 6 hours. You want to help but you feel like you can't."*

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Countertransference

Countertransference is a useful interpersonal barometer for understanding the impact of difficult human interactions. Powerful feelings toward the child or youth involved in sex trafficking can be evoked by similarities between case dynamics or specifics and previous cases and/or personal experiences. These transactions can trigger a range of responses from increased attention to the case, to avoidance, anger and even detestation. Countertransference issues were evident in about 10% of the interviews. These response patterns were related to thinking of their own children when faced with a sex trafficking of a minor case, and cognitive rehearsals of how they would handle such situations as parents. These responses were often accompanied with tearfulness, or expressed sadness. When asked about the personal impact of presiding over cases of sex trafficking one judge reflected this theme of countertransference in the following way; "*Absolutely." "You shouldn't but you see yourself as a {parental}* figure." "It just makes you mad. {I} have to remind {myself} it is not my kid. Judges don't talk about this, it's too close*." In a similar vein, another judge stated "*Yes. I live by the 'my child rule'. I respond the way I would want the system to respond to my child*."

Another judge remarked, "*There but by the grace of God go I*" and reflected on personal parenting challenges and times when circumstances or luck could have produced a negative outcome for family members, and wondered aloud how close traffickers got to them during their teenage years. This judge reported being more attuned to these cases because of specific parenting experiences. Thinking more generally about the juvenile court system, one judge remarked, "'*Paternalistic protectionism' abounds in the courts. 'White protectionism syndrome' – we think we are protecting them by locking them up*." This judge went on to describe how these cases caused worries late at night.

Pride and Professional Purpose

In response to the question about what emotions cases of juveniles exploited in commercial sex bring up for judges, almost 20% of judges described a positive impact of working with youth involved in sex trafficking, even if they also mentioned experiencing effects that were negative as well. These benefits include: increased sense of purpose and pride in the work they are doing, and feeling their efforts were improving the lives of these youth. The capacity to use professional attributes to create change was noted by one judge who remarked "*I think it brings up for me, empathy." "You realize that anyone could be in this place. {I} focus on my job, which is to help navigate people to meet them where they are at and get them where they need to be."* Another judge remarked, "*I don't like to see it but as a former {*descriptor removed for anonymity) prosecutor I feel like I am in a better situation to make a change now*."

*edit made to de-identify gender of respondent

Other judges described feeling work with youth involved in sex trafficking was fueled by a sense of calling or purpose. Examples include statements such as, "*My docket is packed but I still do this because I must! It is my purpose in life! NO one else will do it," "{I} feel*

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empowered to make folks (i.e. child protection) find these kids," and "*Yes, {this work} makes me remember why I became a Judge in the first place.*"

No Impact

A few judges (9 out of 82) report sex trafficking of minor cases had no impact at all on them, saying they have learned to accept they cannot save every child, and have developed boundaries to separate their personal and professional lives. One judge explains, "*No! I can separate my personal feelings. The most challenging thing is to make enough of a connection that these kids will trust me. I think a lot about how to be compassionate and genuine with them when my life experiences are so different*." Another judge described learning early on to keep things professional and set appropriate boundaries, explaining the key to this is, "*Realizing it takes humility and acceptance that you can't fix them all and stay positive and don't take it personally.*"

Remedies

Although not specifically queried about how they managed their reactions to sex trafficking of minors cases, a few judges mentioned having remedies in place including seeking out training on STS or related topics, and using self-care strategies like exercise (most common). One judge explains, "*I see 18 – 30 cases a day. There is vacantness and no "normal" – you see their physical state, see lack of trust, and learn of the violence they have experienced, what that means in terms of the impact for the next generation and where we go from here. We need to provide STS/vicarious trauma training to ALL personnel. Self-care is also important – whatever strategies you find. For me it is biking, nutrition, not isolating*." Another adds, "*Yes! These cases are why I work out every night." "Very taxing," "The docket is very busy and there is very little hope in some cases."*

One judge makes an argument for a caseload mix, so some relief from the complexities of sex trafficking cases can be balanced with other types of cases. This judge remarks, "*Yes, for sure. . ." "I thought before I got involved that this didn't happen here. . ." "You realize this happens to all children, it could be any child. . ." "you can't help but be devastated. . ." "I think we need to hear other cases too."* And finally, another comment highlights the importance of perspective and processing, "*Yeah, for sure, it's terrible," "heart-breaking. These youth are put out of the house, experience abuse, neglect, etc. Humor helps, helps to informally process*."

DISCUSSION

Judges represent a group of highly educated professionals who are put in the position of making decisions that can have long lasting impacts on a youth's life. They feel the weight of these decisions, and many have little training on how to manage the emotions caused by repeated exposure to traumatic material in the courtroom. This qualitative study explores the ways these impacts manifest, and the strategies used to combat

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indirect trauma exposure in the courtroom. This is the first known study to examine this phenomenon with regards to the adjudication of sex trafficking of minors cases, as most published work focuses on the experiences of judges in criminal or immigration court (Lustig, Karnick, Deluchhi, et al., 2008).

Secondary traumatic stress was examined in this study, extending previous research that focused more broadly on stress or burnout, in the context of judicial exposure to a broad array of case types. Adjudication of cases involving the sex trafficking of minors involves inherent exposure to the traumatic experiences of children and youth, an experience that has been noted to be accompanied with increased risk of traumatic stress symptoms in some professionals (Sprang, Craig & Clark, 2011). High case complexity (Middleton, Gattis, Frey et al., 2018) and the multi-systemic interface of professionals (Hammond & McGlone, 2014; Sprang & Cole, 2018) makes judicial experience with this type of cases unique. In this study, there was qualitative evidence that these judges were having trauma symptoms consistent with secondary traumatic stress in at least two clusters: (1) intrusive thoughts, and (2) alterations in arousal and reactivity including sleep disturbance and irritability. Ruminations were also evident and noteworthy. Although rumination is often thought of as a cognitive avoidance strategy (Friedman, Resick, Bryant, et al., 2011), Ehring, Frank & Ehlers (2008) found evidence that rumination can occur not only as a response to intrusive imagery, but also can trigger intrusive thoughts if not addressed. Since judges may have good reasons to deliberate on the specifics of a sex trafficking case beyond the borders of the courtroom, further research is needed to determine if this is professional diligence, or evidence of an emerging trauma condition.

Of particular note in this study was that secondary traumatic stress was not described as an individual phenomenon influenced solely by the dose of exposure and adaptive coping. Indeed, these judges mentioned the frustration, helplessness and anger associated with systemic problems that made their jobs more difficult, as well as the complexity of the cases (e.g. lack of family support, few treatment options) that impedes successful resolution of these cases. This is consistent with findings from the Lustig, Karnik, Delucchi et al., (2008) study, which found structural impediments that interfered with workflow and completion, including lack of resources, institutional failings, and incompetent staff were common themes associated with judicial distress. Notably, these are similar systemic issues to those noted in this study.

Although there were judges who report that these cases had no impact on them, positively or negatively, there was an expressed overall respect for the potential toll this work could exact on a judge. In fact, several mentioned their resilience was related to professional experiences and training that had prepared them to guard against the effects of the work. This observation differs from another qualitative study examining STS in a broader population of judges attending a national judicial college. In this study, Edwards & Miller (2019) note that while 45% of judges reported symptoms of vicarious trauma during qualitative interviews, there was evidence of a few judges who denied the existence of secondary traumatic stress altogether, referring to it as "absurd" and evidence of "government scammers" or "extraordinarily weak minds" (p.14). It is possible that the juvenile and family court judges dealing with sex trafficking of minor cases may have

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different levels of understanding about trauma than those who preside over other more diverse courts, cases and populations.

Several authors have suggested that the cumulative effects of repeated indirect exposure among professionals working with victims results from the difficulties processing traumatic material in an adaptive manner (Sprang, 2020; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Negative countertransference feelings, such as experiencing a sense of inadequacy, frustration, and helplessness, may lead to ineffective practice, avoidance or negative mental health outcomes in those exposed (Neumann & Gamble, 1995). Moreover, it has been noted "the potential effects of working with trauma survivors are distinct from those of working with other difficult populations because the {professional} is exposed to the emotionally shocking images of horror and suffering that are characteristic of serious traumas" (McCann & Pearlman, 1990, p. 134). In this study, there was some evidence that judges were reflecting on personal experience to make sense of the cases before them. Negative countertransference can leave a judge vulnerable to secondary traumatic stress, if these indirect exposures are triggering memories or fears from their personal lives. Judges, like many other professionals may benefit from peer-support or other types of awareness raising interactions so they can identify and address countertransference as it arises (Berzoff & Kita, 2010).

The enhancement of professional pride and purpose is the essence of compassion satisfaction and the salutogenic contrast to secondary traumatic stress. According to Ludick & Figley (2017) this state "offers adaptation and coping as well as resistance to STS that allows the trauma exposed person to develop into a confident, caring, competent worker and social being" (p. 116). Based on the science of resilience, this type of hardiness is cultivated by appropriate levels of self-care, healthy detachment (switching off mentally and not being occupied, physically or mentally, by work-related matters), professional compassion satisfaction, sense of competence and mastery, and utilization of a supportive social network (Kapoulitsas & Corcoran, 2015; Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005; Michalopoulos & Aparicio, 2012). The judicial strategies spontaneously offered during these interviews (e.g., exercise, utilizing social support, caseload mix, task-focused coping) are consistent with these practices that promote health and wellbeing (Osofsky, Putman, Lederman, 2008). Post-adjudication briefings would allow for processing of experiences with peers and/or professionals may provide a pathway toward active coping, but needs empirical testing to determine its efficacy (Edwards & Miller, 2019). Training in best practices for addressing the needs of children and youth exploited by commercial sex is indicated as there is evidence in the literature that receiving competency training is associated with lower levels of secondary traumatic stress (Ludick & Figley, 2017). Prioritizing delivery of training and resources to judges and courtroom personnel on secondary traumatic stress is recommended; however, trainings must provide trainees with practical opportunities to apply principles to their courtroom work (Marsh, Summers, DeVault, & Villalobos, 2016). Judges should be given opportunities to contribute to the development of these best practice standards to maximize the potential for professional satisfaction and growth.

Intertwined with the sense of professional pride and purpose is the judges' efficacy, which is not only dependent on their own training and competency, but also on the

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system's capacity and effectiveness in delivering appropriate and needed services to youth. Most work stress theories define stressors (such as the inadequacy of resources to do one's job) as obstacles to task fulfilment (Semmer, 2003). This is important as perceptions of low task fulfillment can result in a reduced sense of mastery and emotional dissonance, which is associated with poor health and mental health outcomes (Dollard, Dormann, Boyd et al., 2003; Zapf, 2002). System-wide improvements in trauma-informed training and building service capacity for responding to youth will improve the lives of the juveniles whose cases are adjudicated in court as well as the work lives of the judges and court personnel.

These indirect trauma exposures can be thought of as a threat to psychological safety without the presence of these attenuating and adaptive coping strategies. Fortunately, there was little evidence in these interviews that judges are experiencing physical safety concerns related to the adjudication of these cases. This is in contrast to previous studies that identified judicial concerns about physical threats to self and family associated with judicial work (Chamberlin & Miller, 2009).

Limitations

The findings must be considered within the context of the study limitations. First, the sample is a purposive, non-representative sample; in fact, it is unknown how well the findings apply to the population of juvenile and family court judges in the U.S. Second, this analysis derives from judges' responses to an open-ended question about emotions they experience in response to cases of juveniles exploited in commercial sex in their courtrooms. Because secondary traumatic stress and countertransference issues were not systematically assessed in this sample, the responses to the open-ended questions likely do not capture the full extent of judges' experiences of these phenomena. Nonetheless, judges provided valuable qualitative information on this understudied topic.

Issues related to reliability and consistency of findings may affect the results given the nature of qualitative research design. To protect against interviewer bias during the data collection process, semi-structured interviews were utilized to enhance consistency and all interviewers were trained in the research protocol. Further, multiple researchers coded interviews in an iterative, multi-step process whereby they met and discussed coding discrepancies, refining the themes, and measuring interrater reliability throughout the process; results of these procedures indicate strong inter-rater reliability.

Conclusion

This qualitative study provided information about juvenile and family court judges' experiences of secondary traumatic stress related to cases of juveniles exploited in commercial study. Over 80% of interviewed judges described symptoms of secondary traumatic stress and countertransference responses. A minority of judges who described symptoms of secondary traumatic stress also reported increased professional pride and sense of purpose in their role performance with these cases. Judges gave recommendations for how they and other judges can protect themselves from the more negative

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emotional reactions to these cases, which typically involve complex trauma and needs. Moreover, the findings framed within the existing literature on secondary traumatic stress among helping professionals point to improvements in judicial training, courtroom practices, and wider community capacity-building to ameliorate the stressful work of juvenile and family court judges.

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