Organ trafficking is not the same as trafficking for organ removal. Trafficking for organ removal is an individual being trafficked for the purpose of removing their organ(s), whereas organ trafficking is the illegal buying and selling of organs. A trafficked organ could come from a trafficked individual but that is not always the case; they may be two separate crimes. The two terms should not be conflated.1

Illegal profits from the trafficking for organ removal is estimated to be worth between US$600 million–1.2 billion a year.2 The growth in this practice is due to the limited number of legally obtained organs available for transplant, and an increase in the number of people waiting for transplants, as they have become more routine in recent years. Organized criminals can make a lot of money from unethical clinics that will buy a heart, kidney or pancreas for wealthy patients.3

Three types of trafficking for organ removal are most common.

1. First, victims can be forced or deceived into giving an organ; second, people can agree to sell their organ but then are either not paid at all or are paid less than was agreed; and third, individuals seek treatment for a condition (sometimes they are made to believe they are suffering from a condition or they are victims of a road traffic accident) and have their organs removed without agreeing. In some cases victims are murdered for their organs.

The most commonly harvested organ is the kidney; it is estimated that 5-10 per cent of all kidney transplants worldwide come from victims of trafficking for organ removal. The second most commonly harvested organ from trafficking victims is the liver.6

About 0.3 per cent of all trafficking victims are trafficked for organ removal. However, this number is based on detected cases only and it is assumed that the actual number is much higher.5

People living in poverty, with low levels of education and/or few employment opportunities, are most vulnerable to trafficking for organ removal.7

Although there is a lack of concrete data, the average organ supplier is roughly 20 years of age and has a low level of education.8 Additionally, victims tend to come from poor nations, including several countries in Asia Pacific.9

Reports show that recruiters will promise up to US$20,000 for a kidney; however, victims trafficked for organ removal may actually be paid as little as US$650. The average victim receives between US$3,500-6,000 (based on detected cases). Kidneys sourced from victims trafficked for organ removal can sell for up to US$200,000.10

Organ taken from victims are trafficked all over the world through an elaborate network. Many people are involved in this illegal business, including recruiters, victims, doctors, nurses, hospitals and organ recipients.11

Vicwts of trafficking for organ removal, specifically kidney removal, can often be identified by their scars, which are an average of 20 inches long. These scars are so long because those who harvest the kidney try to minimize their costs and so they skip MRI or CT scans that determine the exact location of the kidney. These surgeons do not use laparoscopic surgery, which would only leave a four-inch scar, because this type of surgery is more expensive.12

After surgery, victims of trafficking for organ removal may experience social isolation due to the stigmatization they face for having fallen victim to the crime. Additionally, they often feel ashamed, especially if their overall economic situation does not improve.13 In addition to being at risk of serious physical damage and long-term health problems, victims can also suffer from psychological and emotional effects such as health fears, depression and or feelings of violation.14

IOM X is the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) innovative campaign to encourage safe migration and public action to stop exploitation and human trafficking. The campaign is produced in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Visit IOMX.org or contact IOMX@iom.int to learn more.

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2 Ibid.
3 The Telegraph. 1 July 2013. “Organ Trafficking is a Deadly Trade.”
9 World Health Organization (WHO). Organ Transplantation: A Provisional Picture Based on Information Available Information.
11 Ibid. p. 102.
13 Ibid. p. 11.
14 Ibid.