

Understanding Sex Trafficking

Trafficking involves using force, coercion, or fraud to compel an individual to perform labor or commercial sex acts for the purpose of exploiting them for profit. This is called human trafficking and when we are referring to forced commercial sex, we use the term sex trafficking. This occurs all over the world and involves adults and children. It is important to note that any sexual act against an individual younger than 18 is a crime whether force, coercion, or fraud was used and is called child sex trafficking.

Sex Trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery and is one of the world's fastest-growing criminal enterprises. Traffickers can coerce individuals to commit an array of sexual acts, from stripping, pornography, escort services, prostitution, and more. Traffickers will use and sell individuals multiple times and the nature of sex trafficking is violent. It can produce a variety of health problems.

Individuals being trafficked may lack proper nutrition and may even face food and water deprivation. They may be deprived of sleep, clean water and air, and face physical violence and sexual trauma. The health issues can go on for long periods of time, resulting in reproductive issues and advanced medical problems. Sex trafficking can affect mental health, causing depression, PTSD, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts and attempts. Individuals may commit self-harm in the form of cutting, substance abuse, and eating disorders to cope with the trauma. They may have extreme paranoia or fear and have a heightened startle response.

Sometimes sex trafficking can be confused with sex work or prostitution, but they are not the same and when survivors are labeled as sex workers they can face being treated like criminals. Sex trafficking is not illegal work but forced acts of sex. The fear of being labeled may cause those being trafficked to be reluctant to report.

Some individuals are at a greater risk for being trafficked. Women, especially women with fewer education and financial resources are at a higher risk than men. Children, both girls and boys are at a greater risk and may have a history of abuse and neglect, substance abuse themselves, or in a parent. They may also have a high rate of dysfunction in their family. Child sexual abuse has been shown to be a greater risk for future exploitation.

The Numbers

- In the U.S. alone 100,000-300,000 minors are at risk for being trafficked every year.
- It is estimated that 20,000-50,000 individuals are trafficked every year in the U.S.
- Worldwide 90% of individuals trafficked were women and girls (2022).

Homeless teens are also at a higher risk for being trafficked and may engage in risky behaviors to survive. LGBTQ youth and people of color are also trafficked at higher rates. Individuals that have recently migrated or relocated can also be at a greater risk for trafficking. Those with a history of trauma or substance abuse can be at a higher risk and men are also not immune to being trafficked. Overall, women and girls make up the majority of individuals being trafficked.

Trafficking can cut across all aspects of society and traffickers are not always strangers. They can be family members, a partner, boss, or even parents. Trafficking cases have occurred in a variety of industries, including restaurants, hotels, cleaning services, construction, and on the internet. Government entities worldwide have also compelled individuals into trafficking.

Red Flags

Partner/Employer

- Comes on strong, things seem too good to be true.
- Promises good wages for easy work.
- Threatens opportunity will be lost unless you agree on the spot to relationship or job.
- Terms, location, and details of potential employment are not clear.
- Asks you to do things you are not comfortable with, such as performing sexual acts for friends.
- Constantly checking on you, denies access to your own money.
- Denies contact with friends and loved ones to isolate from social support.
- Displays signs of control, jealousy, threats/use of physical abuse, verbal and emotional abuse, and inflicting punishment when you do not comply.

Traffickers can prey upon people that are vulnerable to create dependency. Traffickers do not always use kidnapping or violence to force someone into sex work, they can use tricks, manipulation, and outright fraud. They can use the needs of vulnerable individuals to gain compliance, such as food, money, a place to live, or a sense of love and belonging.

Once an individual has been trafficked they may believe they are the ones choosing to commit the sex acts and they may

not see themselves as being trafficked. Even if the individual consented originally, if the trafficker used force thereafter, it is sex trafficking. They may have been groomed, to show misplaced loyalty to their trafficker, and emotional ties can be strong. They may have lived in a constant state of fear that they could not put a name to what was occurring.

Traffickers can also use threats of violence or harm to the individual or those they love in order to gain compliance. They can incite such fear that they gain control over what the individuals say or do. They can cut them off from social supports, financial resources, and move them to unknown locations. They may take possession of bank accounts, electronic devices, and limit who they can speak to. Traffickers even pretend they need to be an interpreter for the individual to ensure they do not alert those that they come in contact with, such as hospital staff or during financial transactions.

Survivors of sex trafficking may have feelings of shame, guilt, hopelessness, and a sense that they are at fault for what occurred. They may fear no one will believe them and fear retaliation from those that trafficked them.

Potential Warning Signs

- Sex Traffickers can present as a friend, family member, or partner and may appear to be friendly, caring, and charismatic.
- Inconsistent explanations about injuries or health concerns.
- Poor hygiene.
- Individuals being trafficked live where they work.
- Individuals may not have any identification and may not know their address.
- May be hesitant to answer questions.
- Submissive to authority figures.
- May wear inappropriate clothing for the weather or their age.
- There may be unusual tattoos or branding.

Safety Tips

- Trust your judgment, if something feels off don't ignore your feelings.
- Always keep important documents and identification in your possession.
- Have important contacts, people you trust with you at all times.
- Always have a way to communicate: cell phone, phone card, and charger.
- Have access to bank accounts or cash on hand.
- Always have medication with you.
- Document any unwanted communication.
- Have a secret signal or code word you share with those you trust if you ever feel in danger or feel something is suspicious.
- Always call 911 if you are in immediate danger.
- Practice safe online use, such as not providing location in posts or photos, giving personal information about yourself or friends and family, and making accounts private.

Survivors that have escaped sex trafficking may find it difficult to reenter society, keep a job, and face financial problems. They can also face barriers to care for their complex needs, such as mental health, having proper documentation, and health insurance.

Sex trafficking is a horrific crime and victims may have long-term emotional, mental, and physical issues from being trafficked. Many will need long-term trauma informed care.

Resources

- National Human Trafficking Hotline:
call 1-888-373-7888 TTY: 711
text * 233733
chat at <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/chat>
- Domestic Violence Shelters
<https://domesticshelters.org/>
- Domestic Violence Resources
<https://nnedv.org/resources/safetynetdocs.html>

How to Report

- If someone is in immediate danger call 911.
- Report suspected trafficking anonymously at
<https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en/report-trafficking>
- Report missing children to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at 1-800-843-5678

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