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UNDERSTANDING THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE VICTIM

Recognizing the Complexity of Sex Trafficking Situations

Understanding the perspective of the victim is one of the more difficult tasks for law enforcement when conducting a sex trafficking investigation. The relationships that victims have with their sex traffickers are often complicated. Some victims are trafficked by a parent, boyfriend/girlfriend, or people they consider friends. Once they are prostituted, victims often blame themselves and feel as if because they initially agreed to participate, that they can never leave. Recognizing the complexity of sex trafficking situations will be an asset for law enforcement as they develop sex trafficking cases and work towards building a case for prosecution. This resource explores the various reasons some individuals are vulnerable to being trafficked, how they are recruited, and why exiting the sex trafficking situation is not a simple task for the majority of victims.



Law enforcement and community members should understand that they may not be seen by the victim as the 'hero' that is going to 'rescue' them when dealing with a sex trafficking case. In many cases, it is much more complex. Some individuals don't realize they are being victimized, others are afraid to talk to law enforcement due to the control their trafficker has over them, and some are hesitant to accept help from someone in a position of authority.

Gaining Insight and Perspective

Researchers have explored the experiences of victims of sex trafficking and have found a number of common risk factors, including a history of childhood maltreatment (Farley et al, 2011; Pierce, 2009), use of drugs and/or alcohol or parental involvement in drugs and alcohol (Pierce, 2009), and violence and victimization (Kennedy et al, 2007; Kennedy et al, 2012; Pierce, 2012) among other reasons. American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI and AN) persons appear to be particularly vulnerable to sex traffickers due to a number of factors that are emerging from the limited research on AI and AN victims of sex trafficking. Issues including extreme poverty may lead to victims being forced to exchange sex for money, or even a place to stay. Koeplinger and Pierce (2009) found that victims reported that they did indeed exchange sex for money, in addition to shelter, food, drugs or alcohol, transportation, and/or other types of assistance to meet their basic needs.

How are Victims of Sex Trafficking Recruited?

There are a variety of pathways that bring victims into in sex trafficking situations. Certain risk factors such as early substance abuse, extreme poverty, involvement in the child welfare system, a history of running away, childhood sexual abuse, and dropping out of school are experiences that create situations upon which sex traffickers can target a victim.



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Pierce et al (2011) also found that historical generational trauma in AI and AN women and girls were risk factors for their recruitment or entry into prostitution, as well as extreme poverty, violence and victimization, depression and mental illness, suicide, drugs and alcohol abuse, child abuse, generational prostitution and trafficking of their family members. Getting help or exiting the situation was complicated for the AI and AN women interviewed, as they were unable to find “cultural safety.” This means that they were not in a safe environment to talk about their situation within their own community (Pierce & Koeplinger, 2011, p. 7).

It is typically believed that victims of sex trafficking are simply abducted and forced into servitude. That is most often not the case, and there are many other ways in which someone can become victimized, including;

- They may be exchanging sex for thing of value like food, shelter, drugs/alcohol, transportation, etc.
- They may be in love with or dependent on their trafficker who uses charm, romance, or fraud to convince them to prostitute.
- Their trafficker may have initially been their friend or romantic partner, but after being prostituted, coerced them into continuing by threatening to tell others.
- Some victims are runaways or were kicked out by their families. They are easy prey for sex traffickers.

Why Don't They Leave?

Similar to domestic violence situations, victims are often asked why they don't “just leave the situation.” Here are a number of reasons researchers have identified:

- They may not feel like they are being victimized. In some cases, they feel that being sexually exploited is “**normal**” because of an adverse childhood experience.
- The trafficker or “**pimp**” is sometimes viewed as a romantic partner.
- In many cases, the trafficker has essentially brainwashed the victim to the point that they believe they truly care about them and are there to keep them safe, while law enforcement and authority figures cannot be trusted.
- They may be afraid to leave. Even if they were assured that the trafficker will go to jail, they may still feel like they still won't be able to escape them.
- They may feel like that their situation being trafficked for sex is better than if they were to be free. There might not be enough family or community support to make it on their own.
- There may be cultural norms that ingrain a policy of “**don't talk about it.**” They may be too ashamed to leave and accept help, when it is normal in their culture to keep abuse a secret.

Who Recruited Them?

- In some cases, but not all, traffickers are strangers who have been tracking the movements of a particular individual in a high risk area. Traffickers typically targeted individuals based on certain factors such as extreme poverty.
- Traffickers can be any gender, age, or race. They can be anyone including a relative, friend, love interest, neighbor, acquaintance, or teacher. They need to have access to the victim, either in person or through the internet to lure them into the sex trafficking situation. Many victims are lured by sex traffickers on social media, promising things or a future together.



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- The trafficker could be someone who was previously thought to be a trusted friend or other individual. It could be someone they are “**dating**” when in reality that individual was building trust and grooming them to be trafficked for sex.
- In some cases, the traffickers are their own family members. They may be directly or indirectly involved, whether they throw them out of the house or give them to a trafficker, or get directly involved in the trafficking themselves to make money or for some other gain.

In Their Own Words

Below are a few direct quotes from American Indian and Alaska Native trafficking survivors, which Dr. Roe-Sepowitz collected in her research, explaining how or why they became victims of sex trafficking;

“I’ve always had someone in my family or a family friend do things to me growing up, so when a pimp and I started talking it just went from there.”

“The man I was with made no money so I had to provide for us.”

“My dad told me to go make his money (age 13).”

“I started working at a strip club and wanted more money.”

“My boyfriend (got me involved). He is very manipulating with his words and he very quickly over time made me feel worthless and made me feel like I couldn’t do anything so he pushed me in that direction. Saying it was my way to help out to pay bills. He would say I am helping now. I went along with it to make him happy with me.”

“Hanging out on 27th avenue and had no money.”

“I was 15 years old and a family friend showed me how to make fast money by prostitution.”

“My sister taught me.”

“My addiction to alcohol led to my prostitution.”

“I lost my job and I had no place to live. I didn’t have money to support myself to keep myself alive.”



Take these words, from the experiences of those who have been through it, to understand and empathize with a victim of human trafficking. They will not always be willing to accept help due to fear or other reasons, but having a better knowledge base will go a long way towards building these cases and supporting the victims. With a more knowledgeable community, sex trafficking cases can end before they can begin.

Note: This resource is based upon the research and findings of Dr. Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, an Associate Professor at the School of Social Work and Director of the Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research (STIR) at Arizona State University, as well as the experiences of Rebekah Charleston, a sex trafficking survivor originating from Texas. Data specifically concerning AI/AN victims of sex trafficking is sparse, but the research of Dr. Roe-Sepowitz in Arizona and others in Minnesota aims to bridge that gap.