

The Exploitation of Adolescents in Human Trafficking

Jessica Martinson, M.A. Ed.
Monmouth University School of Social Work

MONMOUTH
UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL of SOCIAL WORK

Introduction

Human trafficking is defined as the use of “force, fraud or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial act.” The United States government estimates that in 2021, 27.6 million people were forced into labor. In order to address this issue, we need to have a better understanding of what trafficking is, how it happens and how to recognize people who may be victims. Trafficking does not happen in a vacuum. Human trafficking can happen to anyone, anywhere, but some populations are far more vulnerable. People living in poverty, people with histories of trauma or addiction, people living with inequity, people of color, and people who identify as LGBTQ are far more likely to become victims because of their vulnerabilities.

Trafficking occurs when a perpetrator induces or recruits a victim, then uses force, fraud or coercion to compel the victim to provide either commercial sex acts or labor services. Traffickers target populations that have a need and appear to provide ways to help them. Many victims know and love their traffickers. In many cases victims do not see themselves as victims because they have been expertly groomed or manipulated. Adolescents are often targeted by traffickers simply because they are young and less equipped to make informed decisions. One way of working to prevent human trafficking is by empowering our youth with knowledge through human trafficking education. Educators can address certain lifestyle factors that may help to prevent youth from being exploited. Identifying and providing protective tools to adolescence is one way we can help prevent them from exploitative situations and build self-esteem in them by giving them the tools to protect themselves from danger.

Types of Trafficking

Sex trafficking– the crime of using force, fraud or coercion to induce another person to sell sex.

Many people in active sex trafficking situations do not recognize themselves as being victims because they have been expertly groomed.

Forced Labor- Individuals are coerced to work through the use of violence or intimidation, or by more subtle means such as manipulated debt, retention of identity papers or threats of denunciation to immigration authorities

Victims often fall prey to traffickers who lure them with an offer of food, clothes, attention, friendship, love or a seemingly safe place to sleep.



Youth Vulnerabilities and Recruitment

Human trafficking can happen to anyone, anywhere, in any community.. And while it can happen to anyone, anywhere, evidence suggests young people of color and young people from the LGBTQ community are more likely to be trafficked. Historic oppression, discrimination and other societal factors make these groups more vulnerable. Understanding youth vulnerabilities can better help youth caretakers prevent trafficking from occurring. Some risk factors include:

- Poverty
- Interaction with foster care or juvenile justice systems
- Youth who have been bullied
- Substance abuse
- Cognitive and physical disabilities
- Lack of support networks, such as strong ties with family or friends
- Family history of sexual abuse or domestic violence
- Low self-esteem
- History of running away, homelessness
- Any youth who experiences discrimination due to race, gender identity, sexuality, disability or other personal characteristic

Education as a Tool to Combat Human Trafficking in our Youth

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”- Nelson Mandela

Education is the key to prevention. Many underage victims of human trafficking are students in our school systems. Teens especially go through many stages that put them at risk. Educating youth on what human trafficking is, how it happens, the tactics traffickers use, and recognizing dangerous situations can empower our youth when faced with difficult decisions. It is equally important that everyone in the school community-administrators, teachers, bus drivers, food staff- all have the potential to be advocates for children by learning the indicators and warning signs of trafficking as well as how to respond when a student is in danger. In 2017, California became the first state to require human trafficking education for students and teachers. Tennessee, Florida and Virginia also now require school staff training and many states are making more efforts, including New Jersey.



Who are the survivors?

*Data is based on information taken from 23,078 survivors in 2020.



Adult 1,435
Minor 5,359
Unknown 15,532



Latino 2,348
Asian 1,809
African, African-American, Black 1,072
White 989
Multi-ethnic, Multi-racial 184

Topics to Address with Adolescents in School

People working with youth need to address certain topics to prevent our youth from being exploited:

1. **Healthy Relationships**- Teens who do not have examples of healthy relationships may be more vulnerable to trafficking. Having open dialogues with youth about what being taken advantage of looks like and how it feels is important. Teens may have many misconceptions about relationships. They may think sex is an obligation or that control means caring. Creating a safe space where these ideas can be challenged and empathy can be given is beneficial to our youth.
2. **Online Safety**- Predators and human traffickers can easily gain access to youth online. Children and adolescents should learn safety tips about keeping personal information private, how to handle online friendships, and who they can talk to if they feel they are in a dangerous situation.
3. **Labor and Demand**- As students learn about economics, educators can openly discuss bonded labor and involuntary servitude. Students should be aware of the offers for jobs that are usually hard to break into- such as modeling and acting. Knowing the indicators of false job promises can prevent teens from becoming victims.

Conclusion

In conclusion, human trafficking is a vile crime that is often misunderstood. While many issues need to be addressed in our society to protect the vulnerable from this atrocity, educating our youth is one way in which we can try to combat the problem. Providing our young with the tools they need to recognize danger and the knowledge they need to empower themselves against predators is one of the ways we can provide safety to our young and vulnerable.

For more resources:

The Polaris Project:; <https://www.polarisproject.org>

Love146; <https://love146.org>

New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking; <https://safenj.org>

Resources

Polaris Project. 2019 U.S. National Human trafficking Hotline Statistics. [Polarisproject.org](https://polarisproject.org)

Blue Campaign. How to Talk to Youth about Human Trafficking. [Dhs.gov/bluecampaign](https://dhs.gov/bluecampaign)