THE UNSEEN SLAVERY THAT SURROUNDS US

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the multifaceted and modern-day evil of human trafficking. It starts by focusing on what human trafficking is rather than misconceptions that distract from overall awareness of the widespread issue and the possibility for effective change. An example of this is the belief that traffickers are always strangers or that victims are always kidnapped. Another misconception is that trafficking occurs only in countries outside the United States. While trafficking is persistent throughout the world, this paper will focus on labor and sex trafficking in the United States specifically. The paper discusses the types of human trafficking, as well as the vulnerabilities that traffickers often prey upon, such as financial insecurity, home instability, and lack of social support. This paper addresses some of the complications that can arise with the law and the prosecution of traffickers, as well as the importance of education regarding human trafficking. It concludes by encouraging the reader to do what they can to make a difference. Through educating one's community and voicing these issues to local politicians, individuals can play an important role in preventing human trafficking and supporting the victims affected by it.

WHAT IS HUMAN TRAFFICKING?

Slavery is not just a historical issue; it exists all around us today, hidden in plain sight. Human trafficking is "a form of modern-day slavery in which traffickers use force, fraud, or coercion to control victims for the purpose of those engaging in commercial sex acts or labor services against his/her will." It is tempting to assume that trafficking is not a problem in the United States, but billions of American dollars are being funneled into this industry. According to the International Labor Organization, this industry profits \$236 billion dollars a year globally, and \$52 billion of that being from the United States. There are "approximately 314,000 victims of trafficking in Texas at any given time. Of those, 79,000, or 25% of the total population of trafficking victims in Texas, are minors and youth. . . "3 Outside of Texas, there are estimated 27.6 million victims at any given time. These statistics are shocking to many, especially when many do not know what slavery can look like in modern-day society.

Force, fraud, and coercion are definitional components of human trafficking. It is crucial to know what these tactics look like when trying to identify human trafficking. Force pertains to physical restraint or harm.⁵ For instance, a victim being confined to a trafficker's home. Fraud "includes false promises regarding employment, wages, working conditions, love, marriage, or better life." An example of fraud is a trafficker who promises an immigrant victim better opportunities for themselves and benefits such as a passport. Coercion "includes threats of serious harm to or physical restraint against any person, psychological manipulation, document confiscation, and shame and fear-inducing threats to share information or pictures with others or report to authorities." An example of coercion could look like traffickers threatening to leak victims' nude photos to others if they do not cooperate.

^{1 &}quot;Human Trafficking," *National Human Trafficking Hotline*, accessed 2025, https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en/type-trafficking/human-trafficking.

^{2 &}quot;Annual Profits from Forced Labour Amount to US\$ 236 Billion, ILO Report Finds," *International Labour Organization*, March 19, 2024, https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/annual-profits-from-forced-labour-amount-us-236-billion-ilo-report-finds.

³ Bruce Kellison et al., ""To the Public, Nothing Was Wrong with Me': Life Experiences of Minors and Youth in Texas at Risk for Commercial Sexual Exploitation," *Bureau of Business Research* (2019): 18, http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/3228.

^{4 &}quot;National Human Trafficking Prevention Month," *U.S. Department of State,* January 20, 2025, https://www.state.gov/national-human-trafficking-prevention-month.

^{5 &}quot;Fact Sheet: Human Trafficking," *Office on Trafficking in Persons*, November 21, 2017, https://nhttac.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/2018-07/fact_sheet_human_trafficking_fy18_1.pdf.

⁶ Office on Trafficking in Persons, "Fact Sheet: Human Trafficking."

⁷ Ibid.

WHAT DOES TRAFFICKING LOOK LIKE?

Human trafficking takes many forms, but it is primarily divided into sex trafficking and labor trafficking. The most common forms of human trafficking are forced labor and sex trafficking; "forced labor, or involuntary servitude, occurs when a person is involuntarily recruited and harbored for work or services under threat of penalty. Sex trafficking involves forced involvement in commercial sex acts."8 Understanding the differences between various forms of trafficking is important, as the methods traffickers use can look different in each situation and can change over time, and awareness increases the likelihood of recognition. Labor trafficking can involve people working in dangerous conditions, underpaid or not paid at all, often in industries like agriculture or in professions with harsh physical labor. A good example of this is illustrated in the case Unites States v. Patricio (2021 S.D. Ga.), in which the conspirators "required the workers to pay unlawful fees for transportation, food, and housing while illegally withholding their travel and identification documents, and subjected the workers 'to perform physically demanding work for little or no pay, housing them in crowded, unsanitary, and degrading living conditions, and by threatening them with deportation and violence."9

Sex trafficking, on the other hand, can be more prevalent in situations where individuals are coerced into commercial sex acts through threats or manipulation. For example, the case of Dwayne Lawson in Orange County, California discusses the manipulation of minors, leading them to be trafficked. Lawson promised the young girl that he would "make her a 'star" and consequently lured her to another state. ¹⁰ Police later arrested the young girl for prostitution, only to realize she was being trafficked as well. Sex trafficking cases can be confused with prostitution. Those appearing to be willfully engaging in prostitution could be trafficked individuals. Victims in these situations are often overlooked. Knowing the attributes of the different forms of human trafficking can assist in others being able to recognize and report it.

⁸ Jeeva Babu, Grace M Boland, and Temilola Salami, "Accurate Identification and Prosocial Behaviors Towards Human Trafficking Victims Among Psychology Students," *Journal of Human Trafficking* 10, no. 3 (2022): 430, https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.202 2.2040075.

^{9 &}quot;Human Smuggling, Forced Labor Among Allegations in South Georgia Federal Indictment," *United States Attorney's Office, Southern District of Georgia*, November 22, 2021, https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdga/pr/human-smuggling-forced-labor-among-allegations-south-georgia-federal-indictment.

^{10 &}quot;Human Trafficking Online: Cases and Patterns," *University of Southern California*, 2011, https://technologyandtrafficking.usc.edu/report/human-trafficking-online-cases-patterns.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING MYTHS

One of the most common things adults encourage children to do is to be wary of strangers. These adults warn about being lured to someone's vehicle with candy or other bribes. Although it is important to be mindful of strangers, in the majority of these cases, individuals are trafficked by people close to them, such as family members or spouses.

According to Polaris Project, one of the biggest national data sources and organizations regarding human trafficking prevention, 42% of sextrafficked victims are trafficked by family members and 39% are recruited by either an intimate partner or spouse. ¹¹ In labor trafficking, 69% are recruited by employers, 15% by family members, and 5% by intimate partners or spouses. ¹² People are often trafficked by people they know well or see often. The concept of a family member or spouse being the perpetrator is well known when looking at crimes like homicide but often overlooked in human trafficking. Acknowledging that an individual could be trafficked by a loved one makes it easier to spot a victim. Some indicators for the general public to look out for are signs of physical or mental abuse, submissive behavior, rehearsed way of speech, unsuitable living conditions, and lack of personal possessions. ¹³ Additionally, public awareness reduces the likelihood of trafficking, because traffickers use ignorance as a tool to keep their victims trapped.

Another myth often believed is that people are physically trapped when trafficked. In "Sex Trafficking of Minors in the U.S: Implications for Policy, Prevention and Research", the authors identified that "press releases and online media reports from over nine years found that fewer than 10% of cases involved kidnapping." This highlights the insidious nature of human trafficking. Some individuals are kidnapped, but most trafficked victims in America live in their own homes and look as if they live a normal life, often attending school and work as normal. People are often trapped through manipulation, coercion, and threats.

Traffickers use physical and psychological threats, such as withholding a place to live or intimidation. Housing instability is a vulnerability attributed with human trafficking and is "variably defined as having difficulty paying rent, spending more than 50% of household income on housing, having frequent moves, living in overcrowded conditions or doubling up with

^{11 &}quot;Analysis of 2020 National Human Trafficking Hotline Data," *Polaris Project*, 2020, https://polarisproject.org/2020-us-national-human-trafficking-hotline-statistics.

¹² Polaris Project, "Analysis of 2022 National Human Trafficking Hotline Data."

^{13 &}quot;Indicators of Human Trafficking," *U.S. Department of Homeland Security*, October 12, 2018, https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/indicators-human-trafficking.

^{14 &}quot;What We Know About How Child Sex Trafficking Happens," *Polaris Project*, 2020, https://polarisproject.org/blog/2020/08/what-we-know-about-how-child-sex-trafficking-happens.

friends and relatives."¹⁵ Additionally, "64 percent of [survivors of human trafficking] reported being homelessness or experiencing unstable housing when they were recruited into their situation."¹⁶ One particular example of traffickers taking advantage of those facing housing instability is United States v Ezekiel Hampton, where a "14-year-old girl was being trafficked, along with several other young women. The girl, who had recently left Hampton, explained that he made the girls advertise their sexual services on Craigslist. All of the victims turned out to be runaways, and Hampton provided them with housing, food, and drugs."¹⁷ This case portrays how traffickers will often target victims vulnerable to housing instability and provide them with housing and other resources such as food and drugs.

Emotional threats make the victim feel trapped, causing them to feel like they have nobody else to turn to, or their necessities will not be met if they leave the trafficker. This emotional form of abuse can be difficult to detect and is often seen in domestic violence and abusive relationships. Myths about what "counts" as human trafficking are dangerous, leading others to invalidate the experience of victims. Less than 10% of victims are physically kidnapped, which leads bystanders to misread evidence of human trafficking. Sometimes the victims themselves do not realize they are experiencing human trafficking.

Traffickers do not have a specific profile. They can be men, women, teachers, coaches, religious leaders, co-workers, friends, or family members. Despite these various identities, traffickers prey upon victims with common vulnerabilities. Some individuals are more susceptible to human trafficking than others, further demonstrating the importance of public education.

VULNERABILITIES TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Traffickers prey on specific vulnerabilities, knowing how to entrap a victim mentally, emotionally, or physically. Often, people preyed upon are already in difficult life circumstances. Many victims have experienced past physical abuse, are impoverished, or struggle with substance abuse. The top risk factors for sex trafficking, according to the Polaris Project, are substance abuse, runaway/homeless youth, unstable housing, mental health concerns, and recent migration/relocation. The top risk factors for labor trafficking, according to the Polaris Project, are recent migration, self-supported

¹⁵ Emma Hock et al., "Exploring the Impact of Housing Insecurity on the Health and Well-Being of Children and Young People: A Systematic Review," *Public Health Research* 11, no. 13 (2023): 1, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK598813.

¹⁶ Brittany Anthony et al. On-Ramps, Intersections, and Exit Routes: A Roadmap for Systems and Industries to Prevent and Disrupt Human Trafficking (Polaris Project, 2018), https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/A-Roadmap-for-Systems-and-Industries-to-Prevent-and-Disrupt-Human-Trafficking-Housing-and-Homelessness-Systems.pdf.

¹⁷ University of Southern California, "Human Trafficking Online: Cases and Patterns."

economic hardship, unstable housing, criminal record, and substance abuse. ¹⁸ Traffickers prey on these vulnerabilities, whether that be emotionally or physically. Traffickers frequently target individuals suffering from housing instability, because they will offer to supply housing in exchange for a particular service, like sex work or unpaid labor. As such, victims often feel trapped because their housing is contingent on their obedience. Similarly, this can be done with food, clothing, drugs, and other resources. Traffickers force victims to rely on them for resources of basic human survival, and often, it is even more common for family members to traffic victims because a vulnerable individual often relies on family as means for survival and a main support system.

More importantly, many victims do not realize they are even being trafficked: "because of how trafficking works, most people do not identify their experience as trafficking until after the situation is over." Often, people trafficked are groomed or have experienced past abuse. Grooming is "understood as methods child molesters use to gain access to and prepare future victims to be compliant with abuse."20 According to Polaris Project, "6% of all the victims who experienced combined sex & labor trafficking experienced sexual abuse prior to their trafficking situation," and "10% of all sex trafficking victims experienced sexual abuse prior to their trafficking experience."21 If a victim has been abused in the past or has been trafficked for a long time, they are less likely even to recognize they are being trafficked if they have been groomed. So many victims do not leave their trafficking situation because they do not identify themselves as a victim, especially if they have experienced it from a young age. According to one study done by students at the University of Texas at Austin, "the average age of first sex trafficking victimization among study participants was about 15 years old."22 If victims have been trafficked from a young age or have experienced sexual abuse or manipulation, this can easily be their norm, and they may not be able to recognize that they are being trafficked.

¹⁸ Polaris Project, "Analysis of 2020 National Human Trafficking Hotline Data."

^{19 &}quot;Understanding Human Trafficking," *Polaris Project*, 2023, https://polarisproject.org/understanding-human-trafficking.

²⁰ Natalie Bennett and William O'Donohue, "The Construct of Grooming in Child Sexual Abuse: Conceptual and Measurement Issues," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 23, no 8 (2014): 957. https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2014.960632.

^{21 &}quot;Sexual Assault Awareness Month: How Does Human Trafficking Fit In?" *Polaris Project*, 2024, https://polarisproject.org/blog/2023/04/sexual-assault-awareness-month-how-does-human-trafficking-fit-in.

²² Kellison et al., "'To the Public, Nothing Was Wrong with Me': Life Experiences of Minors and Youth in Texas at Risk for Commercial Sexual Exploitation," *The University of Texas at Austin: Institute on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault* (2019): 10.

CHILDREN BEING PREYED UPON

As of 2018, UNICEF states, "approximately 28 percent of identified victims of trafficking globally are children" who are taught to trust the adults in their lives. ²³ Traffickers in positions as guardians, coaches, and teachers use this to their advantage. In one recent human trafficking case where officers went undercover as sex workers in a sex trafficking bust "forty-six men were arrested during the operation ... Among those arrested included a high school teacher and coach, a youth pastor, and the operations director of a large hospital network." Traffickers can be and are professionals who work with children, and it is important not to be naive about this unfortunate reality.

Another contemporary component of sex trafficking and sexual exploitation is social media. Social media is a resource that makes interacting with people, both strangers and loved ones, more accessible to people, including children. Social media has many benefits, but it has created another way for traffickers to prey upon minors. With more children and young adults accessing strangers online, there is the risk of facing increased cases of online grooming, inappropriate material, indecent/pornographic exposure, misguided advertising, online gambling, racism, cyberbullying, and sexting. As technology and social networking expands, more avenues to endanger children and young adults are opened. There are an estimated 500,000 online predators active each day. Children between the ages of 12 and 15 are especially susceptible to being groomed or manipulated by adults they meet online, many of which occur in internet chat rooms or through instant messaging. In many instances the online predator will ask a child for sexually explicit photos of themselves.

As social media and new platforms advance, there need to be policies and guidelines in place to protect and keep children safe from traffickers. An example of this is pending before the Supreme Court in Free Speech Coalition v. Paxton, regarding whether age verification on websites containing explicit

^{23 &}quot;Children Account for Nearly One-Third of Identified Trafficking Victims Globally," *United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund*, July 29, 2018, https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/children-account-nearly-one-third-identified-trafficking-victims-globally.

²⁴ Katy Blakey, "Lawmakers, Charities React to North Texas Sex Trafficking Bust," *NBC 5 Dallas-Fort Worth*, January 25, 2023, https://www.nbcdfw.com/news/local/lawmakers-charities-react-to-north-texas-sex-trafficking-bust/3177800.

²⁵ Muqaddas Jan et al., "Impact of Social Media on Self Esteem," European Scientific Journal 13, no. 23 (2017): 329–41. https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2017.v13n23p329.

^{26 &}quot;Children and Grooming / Online Predators," Child Crime Prevention & Safety Center, 2024, https://childsafety.losangelescriminallawyer.pro/children-and-grooming-online-predators.html.

²⁷ Child Crime Prevention & Safety Center, "Children and Grooming / Online Predators."

material and violates First Amendment rights.²⁸ This case examines child exploitation and the ease with which children can access sexually explicit material. Free Speech Coalition v. Paxton is an important case, because implementing age verification or other stipulations on pornography sites, or other sexually explicit materials, can help protect children from being exposed to sexually explicit material online or from being groomed into trafficking. Additionally, it has been found that "sexual predators have purposefully exposed young children to pornography for the purpose of grooming the children for sexual exploitation."²⁹ There are numerous links between the porn industry and trafficking, though the connection between them is not exclusive to children. The Child Prevention and Safety Center states "numerous people are pushed into or forced to perform in porn scenes by way of coercion or threats, thereby making them victims of sex trafficking."³⁰

Barriers to Effective Change

Due to its complexity in identification, human trafficking poses significant challenges for policymakers and law enforcement to address effectively. As described above, and according to the National Institute of Justice, "human trafficking can be hard to detect and harder to stop.

Inherently complex, human trafficking crimes can pose a number of barriers to enforcement. They include victim identification challenges, victim fear of seeking help, and a lack of appropriate agency resources."³¹ Not only is trafficking often difficult to identify, victims often do not trust law enforcement. This may be because traffickers discourage victims from reaching out, but often victims themselves are at risk of being prosecuted as well. Unfortunately, "many survivors of both sex and labor trafficking are at increased risk of being arrested for a range of crimes related to the circumstances of their trafficking."³² In many cases, law enforcement fails to identify victims of trafficking when detaining or arresting suspects, leading to "re-victimization when victims are punished for their engagement in

^{28 &}quot;Free Speech Coalition, Inc. v. Paxton," *Oyez*, accessed 2025, https://www.oyez.org/cases/2024/23-1122.

^{29 &}quot;The Impact of Pornography on Children," *American College of Pediatricians*, last modified August 2024, https://acpeds.org/position-statements/the-impact-of-pornography-on-children.

^{30 &}quot;How Traffickers and Child Predators Use Porn to Desensitize and Groom Victims," *Fight the New Drug*, 2020, https://fightthenewdrug.org/porn-is-used-to-groom-and-desensitize-victims/?_gl=1.

^{31 &}quot;Federally Backed Human Trafficking Task Force Model Yields Progress, Opportunities for Continued Growth," *National Institute of Justice*, 2022, https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications/federally-backed-human-trafficking-task-force-model-yields-progress.

^{32 &}quot;The Criminalization of Trafficking Victims: Beyond Prostitution (Webinar)," U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, November 12, 2019, https://www.ojp.gov/events/criminalization-trafficking-victims-beyond-prostitution-webinar.

the crimes their traffickers forced them to commit."³³ The justice system needs to reevaluate ways to prevent further victimization and the collateral consequences caused by the justice system involvement.

Another barrier is the nuances regarding the legalization of prostitution and its impact on human trafficking. According to the Bureau of Public Affairs, "where prostitution is legalized or tolerated, there is a greater demand for human trafficking victims and nearly always an increase in the number of women and children trafficked into commercial sex slavery."34 However, it is also important to consider that "while trafficking inflows may be lower where prostitution is criminalized, there may be severe repercussions for those working in the industry. For example, criminalizing prostitution penalizes sex workers rather than the people who earn most of the profits (pimps and traffickers)."35 Errors in legislation have a strong potential to cause greater harm to the victims of this heinous crime. These contrasting ideas about sex work display the nuances that lawmakers and legislators must navigate to establish effective laws. Although changes in law could be high-risk, this does not mean that changes should not be made, rather it means that more well-rounded and extensive research should be put towards this issue so that there is less chance for policy changes to cause more harm. Education and awareness are crucial to accomplishing this objective.

EDUCATION

Education is crucial in preventing human trafficking. Education on human trafficking, whether it be through training, certifications, or classes, should be implemented into our school systems, universities, and businesses. Education not only helps the individual who learns the information to be less at risk, but it also allows them to recognize the issue in their communities and workplace. A positive example of this is in the study, "The Impact of Human Trafficking Training on Healthcare Professionals' Knowledge and Attitudes", in which the training, Learn to Identify and Fight Human Trafficking (LIFT), was implemented with healthcare workers. The study concluded that "[a]mong health professionals, the CME-accredited LIFT training leads to a short-term improvement in knowledge of human trafficking and a sustained improvement in awareness and attitudes about human trafficking." Educational initiatives and related training should be

^{33 &}quot;Protecting Victims from Wrongful Prosecution and Further Victimization," *U.S. Department of State*, 2018, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/283800.pdf.

^{34 &}quot;The Link between Prostitution and Further Victimization," *Bureau of Public Affairs*, November 24, 2004, https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ei/rls/38790.htm.

^{35 &}quot;Does Legalized Prostitution Increase Human Trafficking?" *Harvard Law and International Development Society*, 2014, https://orgs.law.harvard.edu/lids/2014/06/12/does-legalized-prostitution-increase-human-trafficking.

³⁶ Hayoung Lee et al., "The Impact of Human Trafficking Training on Healthcare Professionals' Knowledge and Attitudes," *Journal of Medical Education and Curricular Development* 8 (2021): 1, https://doi.org/10.1177/2382120521101652.

implemented in schools and businesses. Training would benefit as well if more studies and research was done to perfect and expand training to be more specific to that field. This could look like training teachers to recognize human trafficking and victims' behavioral patterns in a school setting, along with human trafficking prevention methods.

JOINING THE FIGHT AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Hearing these facts and statistics about human trafficking can feel discouraging but that is not the goal. The more people are aware of this issue, the better equipped we are to fight against the evil of human trafficking. When individuals understand what typifies cases, and the common vulnerabilities, misconceptions, and general statistics of human trafficking, they and their loved ones are less likely to become victims.

Policy changes can make a difference, but there are changes you can make in your own field that can make huge impacts. A great example of this is Shannon Deer and Cheryl Miller's book, Business Doing Good: Engaging Women and Elevating Communities. Shannon Deer's knowledge in business and accounting combined with Cheryl Miller's knowledge from a past working with women from challenging backgrounds, is used to write their book addressing business principles that could be implemented to hire women who have had a past with sex work or other challenging pasts, such as: poverty, addiction, or human trafficking. This book addresses how individuals, communities, and businesses can be positively impacted when allowing those with challenging pasts to use their own unique perspectives and positive qualities, such as perseverance, to help companies flourish. This is an example of how someone who may not work in policy can still provoke change by positively impacting their community and bring different perspectives to this fight against human trafficking.

Another example is the organization Aggies Fighting Human Trafficking, a university student-led organization, that brings awareness and education about human trafficking to students at Texas A&M University and the Bryan-College Station area. While building awareness is a great first step, the organization also takes positive action by volunteering with local organizations, such as Different Day. The Different Day Foundation helps survivors of human trafficking not only to escape their traffickers, but also to escape the cycle. For instance, the Different Day Foundation helps house victims and encourages healing, both physically and emotionally, through therapy or procuring the medical care victims may need. The Different Day Foundation was founded by Marsey Bartula, who worked in social work for over 10 years and saw the gaps that left victims vulnerable, such as unstable housing and lack of healthcare. Helping victims allows them a chance to rebuild their lives rather than rely on traffickers to supply housing or other resources. Bartula used her own personal knowledge of social work to find Different Day and make a tangible difference.

Informing a friend, family member, coworker, or local politician and using personal skills and knowledge makes a difference. Traffickers often

target those who are most vulnerable, seeking to fill a void in someone's life. Engaging in conversation alone makes a huge difference. Importantly, human trafficking does not just terrorize the most obvious victims but also creates an environment of crime and neglect. So, informing others help protect communities. If more people put in the effort to be able to recognize the vulnerabilities and prevalence of human trafficking, it can make a huge difference. Inform others. Inform others for the victims currently enslaved, for survivors, for communities, and for loved ones. Join the fight against modern-day slavery.

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