



The Psychology of Human Trafficking: The Life-Altering Effects on our Children

By Bill Woolf

Human trafficking has received much attention over the past several years. A phenomenon that has been around for decades, if not centuries, trafficking just recently garnered an official name and definition.¹ Sex trafficking involves the: *recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person forced to perform such an act is younger than age 18.*² The question that many ask is: why, all of the sudden, have so many resources been focused on addressing this issue? The answer is—we have a clearer understanding of the level of victimization that traffickers cause on their targets and we have learned that trafficking is deadly. So much so, that the Federal Bureau of Investigation estimates that the average life expectancy of someone trapped in human trafficking is only 7 years. As a community, we can be supportive of people who have experienced the toll of trafficking, and prevent it in the first place.

Traffickers are focusing their recruitment efforts increasingly on children because of particular vulnerabilities that impressionable young people possess. These vulnerabilities fall into four main categories: economic vulnerabilities, victims of prior abuse (sexual or physical), situational vulnerabilities (homeless or runaway children), and “other at-risk” vulnerabilities, which includes children with low self-esteem, attention-seeking youth, children from homes lacking stability or children who lack an understanding of healthy relationships. **It is essential to understand that these “other at-risk” youth are the children in every school, every neighborhood, every church and youth group and potentially in any home.** The dynamics of family life has changed over the past few decades, and traffickers have taken care to exploit those changes in dynamics to draw young people into a seemingly more exciting life through false promises and coercion. In these instances, the traffickers never have to provide their

¹ According to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000. Department of Justice: <https://www.justice.gov/humantrafficking>

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Human trafficking into and within the United States: A review of the literature.* <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/75891/index.pdf>



victims with monetary rewards; rather they offer love and affection to a child who is not being fulfilled at home.³

It can be challenging to sympathize or understand how a person is coerced or induced into engaging in commercial sex by someone simply taking advantage of their personal vulnerabilities. Regardless, it is important to remember that the victimization is the same, whether physical force is utilized or the more pervasive forms of mental manipulation. Arguably, coercion to induce someone into a life of servitude and slavery delivers a greater degree of psychological harm because the person was manipulated to believe that they were complicit in their own victimization. In situations where the victim believes they agreed to engage in the conduct, there is an increase in self-blame and personal shame on the part of the victim.⁴ This complex trauma is very difficult to clinically diagnosis and effectively treat, often times frustrating the child's treatment plan and hindering progress to restore the child to a state of normalcy.

Traffickers employ a large amount of psychological manipulation as a means of power and control over their victim. As a result, the victims are made to believe they consented to their own victimization, and in some instances, they believe that they themselves are the offenders. In this way, victims of trafficking will rarely seek help or report these cases to the proper authorities.⁵

Debatably, no one can consent to exploit themselves, and particularly no child under the age of 18. A person cannot fully understand the mental, emotional and physical abuse that they will endure while being exploited. The human brain is wired for intimacy. In every sexual act, the human brain needs an emotional attachment to the sexual partner, or at minimum, physical attraction to appropriately process the sexual encounter. Devoid of this attachment, engaging in a sex act, particularly a commercial sex act, cannot properly be interpreted by the brain. The effects on the brain from commercial sex are equivalent to the effects of the worst forms of sexual abuse. The problem is that at the time the victim consciously consents, their brain cannot subconsciously fathom the effects of this choice on the brain and body, and thus they cannot fully provide consent.⁶

³ Rao, Smriti, & Christina Presenti, *Understanding Human Trafficking Origin: A Cross-Country Empirical Analysis, in Feminist Economics*

⁴ Farley, Melissa. *Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress*. Psychology Press, 2003.

⁵ United States Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report* (2013), <http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt>

⁶ Farley, Melissa. *Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress*. Psychology Press, 2003.

Let's assume that we are able to rescue the person before their victimization turns fatal, what then? A few months in therapy and they are all set? Unfortunately, the effects of human trafficking are life-altering. Due to the complex level of victimization that occurs during the trafficking scenario, cognitive development in young people is halted or severely slowed, depriving that person's brain from fully developing. The brain is literally rewired as a survival mechanism for the person being exploited. The results: hypersensitivity, inability to sleep, paranoia, eating disorders, depression—all common with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, which is a common disorder trafficked persons experience. Additionally, the victim experiences difficulties with trust and developing healthy relationships and their physical, emotional and spiritual health are gravely impacted. However, life is not without hope.

I have had the distinct privilege of not only rescuing many victims of human trafficking in my former role as a detective, but to also being a part of their path to rehabilitation and recovery. I'm still working with one survivor almost 10 years after her recovery, and each day is a struggle. When someone is victimized repeatedly in a trafficking scenario, their prefrontal cortex is altered. This is the part of the brain that deals with complex decision-making and thought. The brain is rewired to where these decision-making functions begin to occur in the same part of the brain that makes flight or fight decisions—impulse decisions become based on emotion, rather than rational deduction. Not only does this cause the obvious distress in a young person's mental health, but it also results in poor decision-making which often leads to criminal or personally destructive behavior.

How do we support a young person who has undergone such abuse? The answer, which is easier said than done, is patience. We have to understand the immense needs of the trafficked person and understand how they view the world and process everyday life events is very different than you or I. They live in a world of constant chaos and impulsivity, often making decisions which result in less than favorable outcomes. Often times, these decisions are interpreted as an unwillingness of the person to better themselves or do what is "right". However, the reality is that is a result of subconscious brain function and the involuntary process they use to make decisions. Trafficked victims require specialized programs to be able to learn coping mechanism and life skills that lead to positive decision-making.

However, the real answer is to prevent the victimization from ever occurring in the first place. How do we accomplish that? First, is to look at the dynamics in



society that are leading to exploitable vulnerabilities. We have to recognize that the lack of engagement by parents leaves their children vulnerable to the lies of traffickers. These are difficult conversations to have around the dinner table—as a father of six, I know how difficult they can really be. Using opportunities like a family meal, a drive in the car, waiting, etc., and bringing up the issue of exploitation and the fact that predators lurk in the most unsuspecting places (like the popular video game Fortnite), usually brings exasperated sighs or rolled eyes, but these are necessary conversations. Conversations that could potentially save a young person from the life-altering effects of sexual exploitation. Organizations, such as the [Just Ask Prevention Project](#), develop tools for parents, youth leaders, and others working with teens to help them appropriately understand the threats that exist and how to protect themselves and their peers. The best cure to the harm done by human trafficking is prevention—stopping it from ever happening in the first place.