

Human Trafficking and Modern Technology: What we can do about it

By Judith Paporozzi, JD, M.Ed.

Human trafficking is a pervasive problem. It is defined as compelling someone to engage in forced labor or sexual acts due to force, fraud, or coercion. This is not just an international issue; domestic child sex trafficking has become a stark reality within the United States (U.S.),¹ with American children at high risk of being exploited. Continuous advances in technology, including the Internet and electronic communication tools, have all facilitated child sexual exploitation, including child sex trafficking. As a result, the *National Center for Missing and Exploited Children* (NCMEC) has identified that reports of exploitative photos and videos of children being sexually abused online is at an all-time high.²

The commercial sex trafficking of our children in the U.S. is becoming much too frequent—with habitual involvement of electronic devices. In 2020, police arrested 178 people in one of the nation's largest child sex trafficking rings that victimized one young girl at age 13. As "Operation Stolen Innocence" revealed, this child was sold by her mother for drugs on social media sites like Facebook. After her rescue, police found an enormous amount of evidence, including electronic messages between her and those who victimized her.³ This August, two women were arrested for trafficking two underaged girls for sex; the girls, reported missing by their families, were sold in online ads for sexual acts in hotels.⁴ In 2019, police rescued a boy who was being exploited as a sex slave. He had been lured by seven traffickers he met online while playing a video game.⁵

The U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline, operated by *Polaris*, produces annual statistics of its contacts with domestic child sex trafficking victims. Of the 15,000 victims of sex trafficking *Polaris* identified in 2019, in the U.S., approximately 5,000 were minors.⁶

¹ The U.S. Department of Justice: In *Child Sex Trafficking* online publication. Retrieved from the Internet on November 24, 2020: <https://www.justice.gov/criminal-ceos/child-sex-trafficking>

² Federal Register: The Daily Journal of the United States Government: *Combating Human Trafficking and Online Child Exploitation in the United States: A Presidential Document by the Executive Office of the President on 02/05/2020*. Retrieved from the Internet on November 25, 2020: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/02/05/2020-02438/combating-human-trafficking-and-online-child-exploitation-in-the-united-states>

³ Tallahassee Democrat. *Sinister manipulation, stolen childhood: Inside a Tallahassee child sex trafficking network*, November 21, 2020. Retrieved from the Internet on November 26, 2020: <https://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/local/2020/11/21/stolen-childhood-sinister-manipulation-inside-tallahassee-child-sex-trafficking-network/3776116001/>

⁴ South Florida Sun Sentinel. *These 19- and 21-year old women trafficked girls for sex, prosecutors say*. Retrieved from the Internet on November 26, 2020: <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/crime/fl-ne-two-young-broward-women-charged-sex-trafficking-minors-20200826-l5wbvwpmgzfcbk4daa2kp2xwpa-story.html>

⁵ Oxygen Crime News: *7 Arrested in Florida After Allegedly Using Gaming App to Lure Teen Boy Into Sex Slavery*: Retrieved from the Internet on November 26, 2020: <https://www.oxygen.com/crime-time/agaming-app-discord-allegedly-used-to-lure-teen-boys-into-human-trafficking-florida>

⁶ Polaris: *Freedom Happens Now. In 2019 Data Report: The U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline, 2019* online publication. Retrieved from the Internet on November 26, 2020: <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/Polaris-2019-US-National-Human-Trafficking-Hotline-Data-Report.pdf>

Who are these child victims? They include runaways, foster children, and those from broken homes—but it is not limited to the most vulnerable. Polaris denotes that one out of seven children reported as missing to NCMEC became victims of human trafficking, 88 percent of which came out of the foster care system.⁷ Youth from seemingly stable homes are also ensnared. The infamous case of Jeffrey Epstein recently reaffirmed that youth from seemingly stable homes are also ensnared, when it was revealed he targeted young girls including some from middle class families.⁸

The reality is that all children are vulnerable, partly due to advances in communication technology that have abetted traffickers—giving them access to children.⁹ For the trafficker, the advantage is the anonymity; for victims, it's the enhancement of self-esteem or filling a different need within their lives. Young people, seeking approval from others, find that approval is abundant online—many are lured to a place where they feel loved or receive some other type of affirmation.

Advances in communication have also led to the use of social media by children and youth. Social media includes websites, texts, photo/video sharing, apps, live streaming, and MMORPGs (massively multi-player online role-playing games). Many sites are now self-deleting shared content, so even vigilant parents may be at a disadvantage. With smartphones, kids get online anywhere—and can be groomed even when sitting in the same room as their parents.

Online, the trafficker uses psychological manipulation to create a friendship with potential victims that fill their emotional needs. During the grooming process, traffickers will pretend to be “a responsive, considerate, attentive, and loving boyfriend or girlfriend. If a child is having problems with their caregiver(s), traffickers will also play the role of rescuer, providing that child with the kindness and compassion they are missing, and promising a potentially safe place for that child to go to.”¹⁰ Traffickers are cunning masters of manipulation,¹¹ and, they can easily lure and trap children via social media sites before the youth are even aware of what has happened.¹²

The main weapon for traffickers had become the cell phone, providing “new and evolving means by which offenders sexually abuse children as apps are being used to

⁷ National Center for Missing & Exploited Children: In *Missing Children Statistics, 2019* online publication. Retrieved from the Internet on November 26, 2020: <https://www.missingkids.org/footer/media/KeyFacts>

⁸ Schwiengershausen, Erica. *Will We Ever Know How Many Girls Jeffrey Epstein Abused?* The Cut, New York, 2019. Retrieved from the Internet on November 26, 2020: <https://www.thecut.com/2019/07/how-many-jeffrey-epstein-victims-are-there.html>

⁹ Latonero, Mark, et al. *The Rise of Mobile and the Diffusion of Technology-Facilitated Trafficking*. USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy, 2012. Retrieved from the Internet on November 26, 2020: <https://technologyandtrafficking.usc.edu/files/2011/08/HumanTrafficking2012.pdf>

¹⁰ *Targeted, Taken, and Trafficked: An American Epidemic*. The Polly Klaas Foundation, 2017. Retrieved from the Internet on November 18, 2018: <https://biometrica.com/sex-trafficking-america-children/>

¹¹ Stickle, Wendy, et al. *Human Trafficking: A Comprehensive Exploration of Modern Day Slavery*. SAGE Publishing, 2020.

¹² Clement, J. *Internet usage in the United States-Statistics & Facts*. Statista, 2020. Retrieved from the Internet on November 26, 2020: <https://www.statista.com/topics/2237/internet-usage-in-the-united-states/#:~:text=Today%2C%20over%2085%20percent%20of,imagine%20a%20life%20without%20it.>

target, recruit, and coerce children to engage in sexual activity.”¹³ It is very difficult to trace the online footprint of traffickers due to sophisticated and evolving software used by offenders, which can also delay or hinder investigations.¹⁴

Traffickers will troll the Internet looking for potential victims on social media sites, apps and MMORPGs, which allow our children to play with thousands of people worldwide—people we don't actually know. Traffickers use these sites to send out thousands of friend requests looking for vulnerable victims. Traffickers often present themselves as school-aged children (using fake profiles) going through the same trials that the victims share on their posts. The relationship may take a year+ to cultivate to gain the child's trust. When successful, a trafficker will suggest meeting in a public place. Using the cell phone, the trafficker can geotag pictures to pin down the child's location and then use the geo-tracking to track the child's location anywhere in the world. And, with self-deleting apps, parents cannot even trace the child's communications with the trafficker.

There is hope, however, and the key is education. Here are some suggestions to make all children safer: First, know that kids participate in risky behavior like sharing personal information, talking to strangers online, adding strangers to instant messengers, and sending personal information to strangers.¹⁵ They also may be participating in lesser-known risks like keeping their social media sites public. Make sure children turn off the geo-tracking on the cell phone, or set it to private, because anyone can track them otherwise. Work with children so that they don't create ever-increasing online footprints sharing a lot of personal information that traffickers will target. Avoid buying MMORPGs that invite players from all over the world to interact, where traffickers also pretend to be kids (or disable that feature). We must realize that with the online anonymity and easy traceability, our kids are at risk and are at a great disadvantage due to the enormous power imbalance between the sophisticated, highly manipulative trafficker and the innocent child.

We must consistently communicate with children. Simply taking the cell phone away for concerning or poor behavior won't work and can make them more inclined to be secretive with online behavior. Instead, partner with them to guard their privacy. Let the children in your care know that they should come to you if anyone makes them feel uncomfortable online so that you can help them. Ask your schools, churches, etc., to invite experts to teach us all Internet safety. Use these simple rules with your family, so that the risky behaviors of our kids are minimized.

Here are some DON'T(s) of online safety:

1. DON'T give out personal information to people you only know online.
2. DON'T agree to meet people in person who you have met online.

¹³ U.S. Department of State: Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. In *Online Sexual Exploitation of Children: An Alarming Trend* online publication, June 2017. Retrieved from the Internet on November 26, 2020: [Online Sexual Exploitation of Children: An Alarming Trend - United States Department of State](#)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Internet Safety 101: *Risky Online Behavior A Close Look: Who Is At Risk?* Retrieved from the Internet on November 18, 2018: <https://internetsafety101.org/predatorsrisk>

3. DON'T use the same username on more than one website.
4. DON'T make your email address public and searchable on social media.
5. DON'T check in on social media unless your account is 100% private.

Here are some DO(s) of online safety:

1. DO turn off GPS tracking in your phone and disable it in apps that don't need it.
2. DO tell the children in your care to talk to you or another safe adult about people they meet online.
3. DO check the apps on your child's phone, and work together to use the strongest security and privacy settings.
4. DO monitor the use of technology on all electronic devices for the children in your care—know what apps are downloaded, how they are being used, and who they are communicating with online.
5. DO manually set all social media and cell phone apps to private, as they default always to public.¹⁶
6. DO report any suspicions of sexual exploitation to the Cybertipline at:
<https://report.cybertip.org/>
7. DO research about different [apps targeted for teens](#).¹⁷

DO have frequent conversations with the children in your care about online safety and what they can do to keep themselves safe.

¹⁶ For more information, visit websites like www.NetSmartz.org on how to partner with your child to stay safe while online.

¹⁷ *Police: 15 apps every parent should know that could be potentially dangerous.* WMTV nbc15.com, August 14, 2019. Retrieved from the Internet November 29, 2020: <https://www.nbc15.com/content/news/Police-15-apps-every-parent-should-know-542128531.html>.