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### Sex Trafficking: Prevention and Protection

Ever since I was a young girl, I knew I wanted to help protect people from bad things happening to them. Over the years, this dream has developed into a concrete goal of working in law enforcement. In the last four years I have completed two internships, the first in the Exploitation Division of a police department, working to register and keep track of sex offenders in the area. My second internship was working with domestic abuse crime data from around the state of Oklahoma. Both of these internships have taught me a lot about crimes of a sexual nature and lit a fire in me to help individuals being sexually abused and exploited. This fire brought me to research the phenomenon of human trafficking in more depth.

According to Baird, "Human trafficking is the fastest growing criminal industry in the world." (321). Human trafficking is defined as the exchange of persons, by threat, force, manipulation, and coercion (Acts Supplement). Trafficking comes in many different forms: domestic servitude, sex trafficking, forced or bonded labor, child labor, and forced marriage (End Slavery Now). I will be taking a deeper look into one specific area of human trafficking: sex trafficking. "Human sex trafficking is one of the greatest... recognized travesties known to mankind since slavery." (Green 312). I want to focus on this area because it is something that I want to work hard on to change. One of the reasons I want to work in law enforcement is to advocate and protect the individuals that are being forced into this type of labor. There are approximately 24.9 million individuals trapped in forced labor, and of this number, 4.8 million of

those victims are being exploited sexually (International Labour Organization). I want to make sure that these individuals have someone who is standing up for them, ready to protect and advocate for them. These individuals also deserve to have someone by their side, encouraging them to speak up for themselves. In this paper, I will distinguish how sex trafficking is different to sex work, how to prevent sex trafficking from occurring, and the protection of survivors in the end.

#### Definitions:

To start, the difference between sex trafficking and sex work needs to be identified. These definitions matter because they are often confused; many believe that sex work is a form of human trafficking, but sex work is done so voluntarily, for a variety of reasons. United States law does not view adults who sell sex willingly, or with the help of another, a victim of sex trafficking (Weitzer 1337). Sex trafficking is the illegal process of recruiting, harboring, transporting, obtaining, or providing of an individual for a sexual purpose (Weitzer 1337). Key elements to look for when trying to distinguish between sex trafficking and sex work, is that sex trafficking involves force, fraud, or coercion (Helton 439). This means that a person was being strong armed into doing something through the use of violence or threats or tricked into doing it. Sexual exploitation is along the lines of sex trafficking. In my personal work, I dealt with numerous cases of sexual exploitation. Sexual exploitation can take the forms of “sexual harassment, rape, incest, battering, pornography, and prostitution” (Weitzer 1341). In some instances, the abuse that these individuals experience follow them into their adulthood, and they are less able to protect themselves from traffickers.

A common misconception about sex trafficking is that it only targets women. It is believed that men make up about 2% of people trafficked (Lillie). However, women and young girls account for 99% of forced sexual commercial labor (International Labour Organization). These numbers could also be inaccurate due to men feeling ashamed or embarrassed about what was done to them and them not wanting to report it (Lillie). One group of individuals that does not get much attention are transgender sex workers. While these individuals may engage in the sex acts voluntarily at first, they are actually at higher risk of experiencing physical and sexual abuse compared to cisgender sex workers (Lyons). Also studied are homeless youth, who suggest that they began engaging in sex acts in order to feel safe (Holger-Ambrose). These adolescents still have a certain level of dependency on others, for example, financial, emotional, and educational (Alessi 2). These individuals were doing what they thought they had to in order to have a bed to sleep in at night and a roof over their head.

#### Prevention: Know the Signs!

It is vital to notice the warning signs of someone being trafficked. This could help protect yourself and loved ones, because some individuals do not even realize they are being trafficked. Often times, victims are being trafficked by someone they are close to, for example a friend or a family member (Polaris Project). Some indicators that someone is being trafficked include: restricted freedom, they do not have control of their own finances, they seem fearful of someone close to them, travel lightly (meaning they carry very few belongings of their own so that they may pick up and move quickly), and shows signs of abuse (Human Trafficking Search).

Some individuals are at a higher risk of being trafficked than others. These individuals share traits such as substance abuse, runaways or those migrating, having declined mental health,

lower level income (Polaris Project). Victims are comprised of every race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender (Polaris Project). A high risk group are immigrants. To put this issue into perspective and give it a quantifiable number, approximately 700,000 to 2 million individuals are trafficked across international borders every year (Green 317). Those considered most at risk are women and children who have little income or education and live in lower socioeconomic regions (Helton 440). Individuals who run a high risk of being trafficking fall under the age of 18 years old.

Another group of at-risk individuals that does not get discussed as much, are LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others) youth. These youth are more commonly homeless than other individuals their age. This may be due to unsupportive home environments (Alessi 2). The main reasons LGBT youth are homeless are that they were rejected by their family members, experienced abuse, or were forced out of their homes because of their orientation (Keuroghlian). Because they are experiencing homelessness; they do not have access to life's basic necessities. Homeless youth lack access to basic survival items (food and shelter), justice, health care, education, love, and support (Xian). Teens who experience sexual abuse at home are at risk of being sexually exploited whenever they run away from home, because they are on their own and have no one else to turn to (Holger-Ambrose). These children are scared and find themselves engaging in "survival sex," defined as "commercial sex engaged in by a person because of their extreme need." (Xian). Homeless LGBT youth, aged 10-25 years old, are 70% more likely to engage in survival sex than heterosexual youth (Keuroghlian) Their engagement often starts with a "significant other" who makes them feel safe, but few individuals have spoken out that their partner soon started abusing them and exploiting them (Holger-Ambrose).

It is important to know some of the common recruitment tactics that sex traffickers use. Having the knowledge to recognize these tactics could help an individual report possible sex trafficking and keep themselves and others safe. From the year 2018 to the year 2019, there was a 19% increase in victims self-reporting due to their knowledge of trafficking as a whole (Polaris Project). It is important to report an incident if you believe someone is being trafficked, for Oklahoma, these cases can be reported to the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics Human Trafficking Unit and the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (Oklahoma). The individual in the situation may not realize what is going on and this reporting could save them. In 2019, the top 5 tactics of a sex trafficker, were using an intimate partner/spouse to propose the idea of engaging in sexual acts for money or goods, use of a family member to abduct them, an advertisement of a job, someone luring them with money/posing as a benefactor, and false promises (Polaris Project). Further examples of sex trafficking includes homeless youth engaging in sex for the exchange of survival and basic needs, as well as immigrants hoping to come to America for better lives who are coerced into sex trafficking with the promise of money and a place to stay. This is something I took note of when researching domestic abuse, because many intimate partners physically and sexually abuse and exploit their loved ones. These intimate partner relationships are dangerous because they have control over the other person, held up by trust.

#### Protections:

One of the best ways to protect individuals from being trafficked is to educate them about the sex trade, safe sex, and tactics that traffickers could use to draw them in. If an individual is aware of what is going on around them, their chance of being trafficked will decrease with their increase of knowledge (Konrad). Most individuals do not report cases of sex trafficking because

they do not realize that is what is happening to them, either because they are unaware that help exists, they are in debt to their trafficker, they are unfamiliar with their surroundings, they are being threatened (Human Trafficking Search), or they are afraid of law enforcement (Clawson and Dutch).

When individuals shift into life post-sex trafficking, they then have even more issues to face. Many need counseling and medical care. They encounter mental health problems, i.e., psychological trauma, and they experience overall health problems such as sexually transmitted diseases, substance addictions, malnutrition, and a general distrust for others (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Survivors struggle with a multitude of mental stressors such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidal ideation, depression, and anxiety (Kiss). Not only did these individuals experience abuse, mainly psychological, while being trafficked, these individuals are also tortured by their thoughts once they escape. Others face issues with law enforcement. Most laws that have been passed focus on penalizing the trafficker, not helping the individual who was being trafficked. In 2000, the United States established the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (Helton 436). This act helped combine the powers of health care officials and law enforcement to provide victims resources and legal guidance (Helton 447). Some of the best collaborations between law enforcement and the medical field are “Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANE), rape crisis centers, and Sexual Assault Response Teams (SART)...” (Gerassi 66).

To help these individuals in the legal sense, safe harbor laws must be put into place. Safe harbor laws protect the individual from being charged for the crimes they were forced to participate in (Baird 323). Since the enactment of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, many people have banded together to create campaigns and coalitions to provide

education, training, and awareness about sex trafficking (Gerassi 66). These resources aim to bring together community partners in order to provide the best possible assistance to survivors of sex trafficking. There are safe spaces for survivors to turn to such as homeless shelters and women's shelters. Some resources right here in Oklahoma include Dayspring Villa, The Dragonfly Home, YWCA, and Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma (Oklahoma). These resources help provide individuals with a place to stay, a support-filled community, access to life's basic needs, counseling both for legal and mental health purposes, and medical care.

Some more ways to help these individuals is to have better outreach programs. Since many turn to survival sex, society should do its part to step in and provide survival as best as possible. Society should offer the basic life needs that these individuals are so desperate for, that they are willing to do what it takes to obtain them. I would suggest more missions being started to help get people off of the street and into shelters with clean clothes and food to eat. A study done by Holger-Ambrose with homeless teenagers on what would help them brought light on the situation. These teenagers were sexually exploited because they did not have access to resources that would help them get where they needed to go. These teens asked that outreach workers treat them with kindness; they asked workers to be genuine, non-judgmental, patient, supportive, and upfront (Holger-Ambrose). These teens just wanted a safe space to be able to turn to. Immigrants should be promised better protections or job opportunities when they choose to immigrate to America. Individuals of lower socioeconomic classes should be educated about job opportunities and what to look for that may indicate it is a scam. Sexual education programs in schools should also be teaching better safe sex practices. Another aspect I think would be important for schools to cover is what healthy relationships should look like. In my work in dealing with domestic violence, these individuals were in very harmful relationships and were made to do things

against their will because they trusted their loved ones. If schools were to include a segment on healthy intimate relationships within their sex education programs, I believe this could make a big impact on decreasing sex trafficking.

#### Call to Action:

In conclusion, human trafficking is an important issue to me. The exchange of a human life for money and power is something that I want to work hard to derail entirely. Sex trafficking is done involuntarily and is something that a victim is often tricked to do. These victims are led on by promises of stability and security and are often times even indoctrinated by people they know and trust. Sex trafficking does not discriminate and will take any victim, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, gender, and sex. Traffickers do whatever they can to lure an individual into the trade. With promises that sound too good to be true and are too enticing for the vulnerable victims to turn down. It is vital to notice the signs of someone possibly being trafficked and who to reach out to in their state to report the incident. Even after a victim has been rescued from the sex trade, they encounter legal and personal issues. Many struggle with reliving the trauma they have been through. Sadly, while these individuals were being forced to do acts they did not want to, they are often prosecuted for these crimes. Several joint task forces have developed over the years to aid individuals that have been rescued from the sex trafficking, however, they are far from perfect. More must be done to save these people. While the ones who are saved from this life struggle with a variety of traumas, there are many individuals who have not made it out of the sex trade. The world must do everything within its power to put an end to this criminal enterprise. Know the warning signs, know the common trafficking tactics, keep an eye and an ear out, and report any suspicious activity to local law enforcement. It is important that society



educates itself on this issue and understands the way that sex trafficking is handled legally, so that if there is a victim that is having their case handled poorly, they have someone by their side advocating for them.

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