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Unveiling the Multidimensional Impact of Sex Trafficking: Insights from Survivors

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Abstract

This transcendental phenomenological study delves into the lived experiences of 10 women who experienced sex trafficking. Through in-depth individual interviews, participants unveiled a narrative marked by coercion, manipulation, and multifaceted abuse. Despite variations in the duration and onset of their ordeals, participants uniformly expressed the profound and lasting impact of sex trafficking across numerous facets of their lives. Psychological distress, physical ailments, disrupted vocational trajectories, strained relationships, and spiritual upheaval were recurrent themes, illustrating the pervasive nature of their trauma. This research highlights the urgent necessity for holistic support and intervention strategies tailored to the intricate and multidimensional needs of sex trafficking survivors as they embark on the arduous journey toward recovery and healing. The findings underscore the imperative for counselor training programs to incorporate a nuanced understanding of sex trafficking trauma and its far-reaching implications, thereby fostering more effective therapeutic approaches. This study contributes to a deeper comprehension of the challenges faced by survivors and advocates for systemic changes to enhance the support framework available to them.

KEYWORDS
sex trafficking, survivors, phenomenological, mental health, trauma

Sex trafficking is arguably one of the most misunderstood and damaging forms of human trafficking. Sex trafficking is defined as "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act" (Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, 2000, Section 103). This form of modern-day slavery impacts millions of people globally and is especially a large concern within our own communities in the United States (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2023). Due to the underground nature, limited community awareness, and survivors' reluctance to disclose, approximately less than 1% of survivors of human trafficking cases in the world are ever identified (Bedbible Research Center, 2023). From what we do know from federally reported cases, research,

and human trafficking hotlines, 6.3 million people are estimated to be trapped in forced sexual exploitation globally on any given day (ILO, 2022). The age of onset has been reported as young as under the age of 8, with most individuals around 15–17 years of age when trafficking began (Nichols et al., 2022). Conversely, family members facilitate more than 30% of child sex trafficking experiences (U.S. Department of State, 2021). This can considerably reduce the likely age of onset for those who experience familial sex trafficking.

Due to the prevalence of sex trafficking, counselors must understand the experiences of sex trafficking survivors and the impact that such experiences have on mental health. The past four years of sex trafficking literature in the counseling field have primarily focused on the need for counselor training (Litam & Lam, 2020; Romero et al., 2024), reviewing available screening tools (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2022a), developing competencies for working with child sex trafficking survivors (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2022b), and the role of counselors in working with these clients (Browne-James et al., 2021; Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2024). There remains, however, a lack of comprehensive research on the mental health experiences of survivors. This knowledge can dispel myths and misconceptions about sex trafficking, thereby enhancing counselors' capacity to identify, provide services, and advocate for sex trafficking survivors.

SEX TRAFFICKING AND MENTAL HEALTH

With increased focus on sex trafficking research, many studies have explored recruitment, experiences, and post-sex trafficking challenges. For example, researchers have qualitatively studied survivors' experiences exiting sex trafficking (e.g., restoration, recovery; Gonzalez et al., 2017) and engaged in mixed-methods community-based participatory research to identify the health needs among African American male survivors of sex work (Trudeau et al., 2021). Overall, existing literature supports that the types of physical and psychological abuse trafficking victims experience often lead to serious mental or emotional health consequences. For instance, case illustrations and empirical findings represented in the literature often cite depression, posttraumatic stress, dissociation, irritability, suicidal ideation, self-harm, suicide, and substance abuse as mental health consequences of sex trafficking often experienced by survivors (Banu et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Trudeau et al., 2021). Comorbidity with substance abuse is high as traffickers may use drugs to manipulate individuals, either by enticing them with substances during the grooming phase or by forcing drug consumption and dependency to maintain control (Meshelmiah et al., 2018). Additionally, sex trafficking survivors may exhibit severe mental illness, including schizophrenia and psychotic disorders (Oram et al., 2016).

Despite mentions of mental health consequences, few have focused solely on survivors' mental health experiences. Mumey et al. (2021) studied the mental health experiences, pathways of recovery, and social reintegration of six female sex trafficking survivors in New York City. They identified six themes endorsed by at least two participants. These included the experience of trafficking, living with the effects of trafficking, mental health problems related to trafficking, coping, experiences with mental health professionals, and recommendations for supporting survivors. Participants identified anger as their primary emotional reaction post-trafficking, along with depression and depressive symptoms such as crying, difficulties with sleeping, numbness, and suicidal ideation. They also described trauma accumulation, flashbacks, avoidance, hypervigilance, and fear (Mumey et al., 2021). Similarly, Chu et al. (2022) systematically analyzed first-hand accounts of 30 female survivors from Western countries (i.e., Australia, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom, United States). Findings revealed nine themes, one capturing the

mental health consequences after trafficking with depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) identified as common mental health disorders (Chu et al., 2022).

SEX TRAFFICKING RESEARCH IN THE COUNSELING PROFESSION

Scholarship within the counseling field has largely focused on raising awareness of sex trafficking, what makes someone vulnerable to it, and how counselors can begin to help these clients (Browne-James et al., 2021; Litam, 2017; Litam & Lam, 2020; Marburger & Pickover, 2020; Thompson & Haley, 2018). The authors have reviewed available instruments for screening and identification (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2022a; Romero et al., 2021), developed competencies for counselors working with youth who experienced sex trafficking (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2022b), and studied the experiences of counselors working with sex trafficking survivors (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2024). Despite occasional mentions of mental health concerns like self-harm, regaining a sense of control, PTSD, and anxiety in the literature (Litam, 2017), there remains a notable gap in research with mental health experiences not being a primary focus.

This trend persists when examining literature from other mental health professions (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Sukach et al., 2018). For example, in the field of marriage and family, Sukach et al. (2018) studied survivors' experiences, showcasing themes such as sex trafficking experiences, perceptions of men post-trafficking, emotional impacts, coping mechanisms, and feelings about the legal system. Though mental health concerns like low self-esteem, PTSD, self-harm, drug use, and suicide attempts were noted, the study primarily focused beyond mental health experiences. Thus, the purpose of this study was descriptive and sought to explore first-hand accounts from survivors on the mental health consequences of sex trafficking. The guiding research question for this study was what are the mental health experiences of sex trafficking survivors in the United States? We hoped that an in-depth exploration of survivors' mental health experiences could provide an overview of current needs, challenges, and recommendations for clinical practice and research.

METHOD

Phenomenology is a qualitative approach used to study lived experiences and their attached meanings (Creswell, 2013). We utilized transcendental phenomenological research to understand sex trafficking survivors' mental health experiences in the United States. Transcendental phenomenology, developed largely by Husserl (1954/1970), involves setting aside preconceived ideas (*epoché*) to perceive phenomena clearly, allowing others to understand their true meaning. This method, suited for our study, enables us to provide detailed descriptions while using bracketing techniques to explore participants' experiences (Hays & Singh, 2022). Applying Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam's method, we examined sex trafficking survivors' mental health experiences and interpreted the data while capturing the essence of the phenomenon.

Researchers' Reflexivity

As the instruments of investigation, transparent discussions of researcher reflexivity are a critical component of rigorous and trustworthy qualitative research (Hays & Singh, 2022). The first (cisgender female, Latina) and second authors (cisgender female, biracial) are current counselor educators at a university in the Southern United States with numerous publications, presentations, and trainings to counselors-in-training and professional counselors on sex trafficking. They both hold a license as a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) and have a combined 19 years of clinical experience working with at-risk youth in community and school settings. The third author (cisgender male, biracial) is a LPC Supervisor and counselor

educator at the same university who joined the research team based on his clinical and research interests in trauma. During data collection, the fourth author (cisgender female, White) was a master's student completing her clinical internship through an educational program focused on servicing underserved communities at risk for sex trafficking. She received a 2-day training on sex trafficking and completed her clinical placement at a children's advocacy center. The final author (cisgender male, biracial) is a doctoral student and LPC Supervisor with clinical experience providing services to survivors and those at risk of sex trafficking within court-adjudicated outpatient behavioral treatment for co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders. As counselors, we all had an interest in focusing on survivor's mental health yet attempted to look at the larger impact of sex trafficking on participants' lives. We also had to cautiously consider our misconceptions of sex trafficking, survivors, and traffickers. For example, misconceptions about choice, differences between sex trafficking and sex work, and how we interpreted the data were ongoing conversations. To reduce researcher bias, we engaged in weekly debriefing meetings to discuss preconceived notions throughout data analysis.

Participants

The resulting participant pool consisted of 10 women who experienced sex trafficking ranging in age from 30 to 42 years (M = 36.7, Mdn = 38.5, SD = 5.1). Eight participants identified as White, one participant identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, and one participant identified as Black. Nine participants were born in the United States. One participant was born in another country and has lived for four years in the United States. Participants' highest level of education included completing secondary school (n = 2); some college (n = 1), college (n = 3), some graduate school (n = 1), and graduate school (n = 3). Participants reported their marital status as single (n = 3), married (n = 1), separated (n = 2), and divorced (n = 4).

Data Collection Procedures

After receiving institutional review board approval from the university, we sought participants through purposeful sampling. We began our recruitment process at the beginning of 2022 by contacting colleagues with a request to share our recruitment email with individuals who met our inclusion criteria. We included sex trafficking survivors over the age of 18 and excluded individuals who were either under 18 or had not experienced sex trafficking. Our recruitment email detailed the purpose of the study, inclusion and exclusion criteria, benefits and risks of participation, the voluntary nature of participation, and the requirements of participation. This resulted in one participant volunteering.

After two months, we noticed challenges in attaining more participants through personal and professional connections. Therefore, we decided to engage in other purposeful sampling strategies including reaching out directly via social media accounts (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, Twitter) to individuals who openly disclosed themselves as sex trafficking survivors. We sent the recruitment script via direct message through their social media accounts and then set up virtual interviews. Following qualitative researchers' recommendation of sample size, we sought a range between five and 25 participants (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Through social media accounts, we had nine individuals volunteer to participate in two months. All survivors who agreed to participate completed the consent forms, a demographic form, and a one-time Zoom interview. All participants received a $20 gift card for their involvement in the study. Our data collection ended in May 2022.

The researchers developed interview questions based on the purpose of the study and from a review of the literature. The third author completed the interviews as he is a counselor educator with an understanding of qualitative inquiry and is a Certified Clinical Trauma Professional. Following Moustakas' (1994) recommendations, the interview

protocol consisted of 16 semi-structured, open-ended questions that invited an in-depth discussion of their experiences. Interviews lasted from 41 to 145 minutes in length (M = 80.9) and occurred via Zoom. During the interviews, he used counseling skills (e.g., reflections, minimal encouragers, appropriate body language) and prompt questions to facilitate the conversation and to build upon the experiences discussed. Sample questions included: (a) Please share, to the extent that you are comfortable, your experiences with sex trafficking. (b) How have these experiences impacted you? (c) What do you think are the most common challenges that survivors experience after their sex trafficking experience? and (d) What helped you overcome the impact of sex trafficking? We recorded all interviews for verbatim transcription and de-identified them upon completion.

Data Analysis

Adopting Moustakas' (1994) adaptation of van Kaam's data analysis approach, the data analysis team (comprising the first, second, fourth, and fifth authors) followed the seven-step process outlined by this methodology. NVivo software (Version 12) facilitated data management and analysis. Consistent with qualitative research best practices, the first author conducted training sessions for the fourth and fifth authors. The data analysis spanned 10 months, divided into two stages. The breakup of stages occurred for two reasons: (a) requirements of qualitative research to be reflexive and based on context (Hays & Singh, 2022), and (b) time.

During the first stage, spanning from October 2022 to February 2023, we conducted an analysis to present preliminary findings at a national counseling conference, focusing on the initial five participants. The fourth author initiated the phenomenological analysis by individually examining transcripts and horizontalizing meaning units to code all unique statements (Moustakas, 1994). Following this, we consolidated files to identify invariant constituents through reduction and elimination, a process led by the first and second authors, who also served as secondary coders. During this process, we also engaged in reduction and elimination, determining necessary and sufficient data to understand the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In addressing discrepancies, we engaged in discussions, annotated these variances, and ultimately achieved consensus. Next, the team identified clusters of meanings within similar statements, forming the basis for an initial codebook (third step). Utilizing this initial codebook, we scrutinized the themes against the dataset to ensure their alignment with participants' experiences (fourth and fifth steps). We then crafted textural descriptions, comprising participants' verbatim quotes, and structural descriptions, exploring emotional, social, and cultural connections (sixth step). We realized the need to broaden our focus beyond mental health experiences to encompass their sex trafficking experiences and implications for counselors. We created composite textural-structural descriptions, organizing data into three themes: (a) experiences of sex trafficking, (b) the multidimensional impact of sex trafficking, and (c) implications for counselors.

Our second round of analysis spanned from August 2023 to March 2024, mirroring the initial steps of the process. Upon completion, we determined data saturation with a total of 3979 codes among 10 participants. Given the substantial dataset, we opted to divide our findings into separate manuscripts, prioritizing the exploration of sex trafficking's multidimensional impact. As we identified themes, we recognized that while a significant portion of our findings centered on the mental health repercussions of sex trafficking, the data revealed a broader impact affecting various aspects of survivors' lives, subsequently influencing their mental well-being. We iteratively refined our codebook to reflect participants' shared experiences, crafting textural and structural descriptions accordingly (fourth, fifth, and sixth steps). Finally, we synthesized our findings into composite textural-structural descriptions, ensuring

a thorough representation of recurring and prominent themes across all participants through subtheme organization.

Strategies for Trustworthiness

To ensure ethical validation, credibility, transferability, confirmability, sampling adequacy, and authenticity of our analysis, we employed several strategies for trustworthiness. These included reflexive journals, triangulation of researchers, peer debriefer, external auditor, and member checking (Hays & Singh, 2022). Throughout data analysis, we maintained reflexive journals and held weekly bracketing meetings to discuss codes, potential themes, and personal assumptions. Researchers on the team brought varying levels of experience with research and the topic of sex trafficking, which we believe fostered a balanced analysis. We engaged in two rounds of member checking with participants, one after interview transcription and another after theme formulation. No participants changed the transcription of their interview or disagreed with the presentation of the themes. An external auditor, a counselor educator with experience in conducting qualitative research and knowledge of sex trafficking, also reviewed the NVivo file and the write-up of the findings. The external auditor largely concurred with our data analysis methods and the clarity of our findings' presentation. She advised us to delve deeper into the nuanced dynamics between trafficker and survivor, emphasizing the need to distinguish between the blurred lines of coercion and the survivor's sense of self-identity. We present the following results with the use of pseudonyms for most of our participants, except for Crystal, Jennifer, Jes, and Mia, who preferred their real names.

FINDINGS

Participants detailed experiences of sex trafficking, including control over basic needs, finances, and loved ones, along with fear, punishment, and various forms of abuse. Trauma bonding hindered recognition of their situation and prevented reporting. Despite varied durations, all participants described profound, lasting impacts on physical, vocational, relational, spiritual, and psychological aspects of their lives. When discussing their mental health experiences, participants described its impact as profound, "widespread," and "with a lot of layers to everything." Annabel explained, "It's affected everything like there's no part of my life that is not affected by this." Mia expanded that trafficking is "emotional, it's physical, it's spiritual, it's mental, it's sexual." We identified five themes illustrating the multidimensional impact of sex trafficking.

Physical: "Forever Impact"

All participants spoke about the physical impact of sex trafficking and its connection to their mental health. Jes aptly expressed, "All of our trauma is stored in our body." We categorized this theme into two subthemes: (a) *physical damage to the body* and (b) *medical and health concerns.*

Physical Damage to the Body

Eight participants provided detailed accounts of the physical harm they suffered and the enduring impact it has had on their overall physical well-being. Participants indicated that much of the trauma that has resulted in physical damage to the body has led to persistent pain and discomfort, physical therapy, and the need for multiple surgeries. Participant comments related to the physical damage to the body as a result of sex trafficking consisted of "I have a lot of physical issues" and "my body's just screwed," as emphasized by Cassie and Annabel, respectively. Monica's comment further illustrates the multidimensional impact of sex trafficking and the complexity of the healing process: "my body is still healing yes, the mind is healed but my body is still healing."

Participants spoke of the physical abuse inflicted by their traffickers and consumers. Cassie recounted some of the violent encounters with her

trafficker, such as being picked up by her collar and slammed down. She described suffering from pervasive hip problems, in addition to "permanent scarrings from him hitting me in my face," which resulted in her jaw clicking when she spoke. Trauma to the jaw was also reflected in Crystal and Annabel's interviews, which led to the need to have reconstructive surgery. Annabel described having extensive scarring on both of her ankles, bilateral wrist problems, and an overwhelming number of joint problems from suspension during trafficking, all of which have led to multiple surgeries. She later emphasized, "my body has definitely kept the score." Some participants spoke of tattoos and branding that were forcibly inflicted on their extremities. Other damage described by participants was not as visible, for example, Niki attributes the fact that she now processes information slower to the physical trauma she experienced while trafficked.

Medical and Health Concerns

Seven survivors spoke of medical and health concerns that either pre-existed their trafficking experience or were a direct result of the physical trauma. Jes shared, "I haven't had this problem, but I've worked with a lot of survivors who their genitalia are like almost closed shut or is just not able to be really used…not able to have kids." Other participants emphasized that what survivors experience can be violent, but not all physical consequences result in clear physical damage. Several participants discussed how pre-existing conditions such as polycystic ovarian syndrome (Betty), multiple sclerosis and irritable bowel syndrome (Monica), Ehler's Danlos syndrome (Annabel), and high blood pressure (Gretchen), made the physical impact of sex trafficking worse. Annabel explained, "I have Ehler's Danlos syndrome, which is like rare genetic thing…there's laxity in my joints so they're more prone to subflexing and dislocating." She added, "that made what they did down there [the location where her abuse occurred] worse. And it kind of became a game for them, because it's like how far can we push these joints."

As for the direct medical and health consequences of sex trafficking, participants described having HPV (Betty), seizures and light sensitivity (Annabel), excessive weight gain (Betty), unplanned pregnancy and forced abortion (Mia), and struggles with cystic acne (Gretchen). While hospitalized from a severe bacterial infection stemming from a trafficking experience, Monica identified learning "I had an ovarian cyst, I had stomach ulcers, my appendix had bursted, my gallbladder wasn't doing well…" Similar to Monica, Gretchen's comment underscores the profound impact of stress on the body: "I've gotten like a really like really bad cystic acne on my face after I got out of all the trauma…all this like stress and toxins and stuff like in my body."

Vocational: "You Know What People Need? Money."

Nine participants discussed vocational problems after sex trafficking. Jes asked, "how do you make money outside of the sex industry and good money?" We classified this theme into two subthemes: *(a) negative impact on work and education* and *(b) creating financial stability.*

Negative Impact on Work

Eight participants highlighted the detrimental effects of trafficking on education and employment. Survivors faced challenges in finding jobs outside of trafficking due to gaps in employment, criminal records, and lack of experience. Jennifer emphasized, "especially if someone's been doing this for a long time…they don't have any experience doing anything else…they don't have anything that they can put on a resume." Niki described the struggle of explaining her absence from the workforce, stating, "Going back into a job interview and trying to explain why I was on a career sabbatical." Jennifer recounted being coerced by her trafficker to "quit my jobs um and... drop out of college."

Navigating who to be and how much to disclose to coworkers was another challenge. Annabel said, "If they knew my truth and they knew all that was actually happening, they would be much more concerned about me." Similarly, Betty shared, "I don't share my story a whole lot with a lot of the people that I work with." Not being able to be open with coworkers prevented them from obtaining support. Annabel explained, "I look like a model employee... and then I'm leaving to go to my car and I'm breaking down devastated." It was emotionally exhausting to appear as a model employee while feeling different on the inside. During their journeys, it was also challenging to find a job that was not triggering. Mia explained by saying, "That's such a challenging space and peace…finding that job that doesn't trigger them but also gives them the open mind and care and comfort to go through healing."

Creating Financial Stability

Six participants discussed the process of creating financial stability after leaving sex trafficking. This was a struggle, considering the amount of income and the lavish lifestyle that often accompanied sex trafficking. Jes pointed out, "if I can really leave you with one thing, it's that the sex industry makes money. You know what people need? Money." Jes, therefore, created financial stability by leaving her trafficker and engaging in empowered sex work. She further explained, "for the next three years I was still making 30 to 50 thousand dollars a month…it was incredibly empowering…the problem with escaping a trafficker is you need income."

An important piece of creating financial stability for survivors was developing new educational possibilities, new sources of income, and entrepreneurship. Participants recommended classes for survivors to work on their healing, while also teaching how to create their own career path. Crystal shared her experience with this, stating, "I graduated from the program... then I had five meetings set up with people that could possibly help me start a nonprofit." Another source of income for participants was telling their stories and creating resources. Jes published a book on her experience and profits from it by selling it herself. She explained, "because I own the publishing to my book, it's not on Amazon, you can only buy it through me." Gretchen found a job with a trafficking organization, recalling that for her to tell her story, she wanted to "become the survivor leader here" and become a victim advocate. Monica emphasized the significance of flexibility and autonomy in her schedule, acknowledging an "untraditional" schedule where "some days yeah I'm working eight hours and other days I'm working five." She tailored her schedule to accommodate her needs, allowing her to cut back on challenging days and work more when she felt better. This sense of control over her workday was essential for her healing journey after enduring prolonged control by others.

Relational: "Nobody Seems Safe"

All participants discussed the impact of sex trafficking in their relationships. When looking at the data, we identified two subthemes (a) *relationship with self and trafficker* and (b) *relationships with others*. About this theme, Crystal said, "You want to trust people and you want to have people in your life, but at the same time nobody seems safe. You question…do I trust myself?"

Relationship with Self and Trafficker

All participants reflected on how their connection with their trafficker continued to shape their identity post-trafficking. Throughout their experiences, they developed emotional attachments to their traffickers that influenced the continuous exploitation or protection of their trafficker. Betty, Cassie, Crystal, and Gretchen explained having some sort of relationship with their trafficker to this day due to sharing a child or maintaining a level of friendship. Annabel spoke to traffickers' emotional abuse, stating, "a lot of traffickers will drill in like how useless you are…you won't make it, you don't

have the money, you're too stupid". She then explained how this abuse tied into the complex layering of relationships with her trafficker by saying, "teasing out the identity of the perpetrator versus the victim and helping them know that those are two separate things I think that's where it starts is just um helping them divorce their identity."

This relational complexity extended to how participants described changing identities and shifted their self-perception after trafficking. Mia, who was three years old when she was first trafficked, said, "For children, [sex trafficking] becomes a part of their identity. I was good at it. There are days when I miss it. When it's one of the few things you were good at, to lose that is very hard." Mia reclaimed her identity by taking steps to change her name, "the meaning of my old name was *gentle* one and that's not what I want to be." Participants also wrestled with how to integrate an identity sometimes defined by words like victim or survivor. Mia stated, "I'm not going to give them the satisfaction of simply being a survivor. For me, being a survivor was never enough." Monica continued, "When you're going through healing and you're finding your identity…it's fully taking down that mask and being authentic."

Relationships with Others

Their sex trafficking experiences and relationships with traffickers impacted all other types of relationships, including those with family, romantic partners, and friendships. Cassie, Crystal, Gretchen, and Monica spoke to their difficulties with relationships after sex trafficking. Cassie tearfully lamented relationships as "the hardest" domain of recovery after sex trafficking, saying, "How do you trust anybody again, is it grooming or is it love?" Mia, Crystal, Monica, and Niki also stated their struggles understanding how to trust others after sex trafficking. Mia stated, "I do one of two things- either I fully trust and probably shouldn't or I don't trust at all." Participants most often spoke of this in terms of interpersonal boundaries. Cassie said, "Coming out of that life, we really don't have any boundaries." After sex trafficking, she developed rigid boundaries, fearing relational risk, "It's like this automatic thing and I almost don't have control over it. It's just this permanent thing that's just there because of what I've been through…like a shield of armor."

For some, the fears of harm within relationships materialize after sex trafficking. Cassie and Gretchen described experiencing abuse from partners after trafficking. Gretchen shared that "every relationship I've had after [sex trafficking] has been…abusive…controlling…it's just hard to move forward and become confident and have a good relationship." Annabel reported learning to conceptualize a loving relationship for the first time after trafficking. "I didn't know what that was, I thought it meant sex stuff," she explained. Her past experiences added confusion to her relationships, stating, "I threw safe people under the bus…the good guys become the bad guys". Monica said, "It takes healing and time to feel like you can be vulnerable with someone you love compared to someone who's paying." She described not allowing relationships to develop, stating, "I sabotaged relationships because they were healthy." Five participants also talked about how sex trafficking affected friendships. Niki explained, "I say former friends, because…there's no connection," Betty stated that it was "challenging to make [new] friends." All participants also spoke to the impact of sex trafficking on familial relationships. Annabel had difficulty with family members due to sex trafficking, saying, "I struggle because [my step-father] reminds me a lot of my perpetrator, like his sense of humor and facial expressions, his tone." Jennifer stated that families of survivors need to "understand that [sex trafficking] is a traumatic event…it's really important to not blame them, not blame the victim, no matter what the circumstances were."

Spiritual: "A Hundred Times Worse"

All 10 participants reflected on the tension of navigating the spiritual dimension pre- and post-

their sex trafficking experiences. We organized this theme into two subthemes: (a) *religious upbringing and rupture* and (b) r*eligion and spirituality after trafficking*.

Religious Upbringing and Rupture

All participants reflected on this subtheme, sharing their experiences growing up in a Christian family and participating in church life before or while being trafficked. Mia explained, "I grew up um in a <air quotes/> Christian home and I use that term loosely, but I grew up going to church and that was a part of my upbringing and was just a part of life." At the same time, she added, "I was trafficked starting at the age of three, so that was my life. That was part of my normal…my entire childhood, so from three to 18." We also noticed the extent of religious upbringing in two participants' use of biblical references when speaking about their sex trafficking experiences. Jess related to Joseph's journey from enslavement to a powerful position in Egypt as a metaphor for perseverance and overcoming adversity.

However, participants' affiliation with religion changed while they were being trafficked. For instance, Betty, who was raised in a conservative household and received her education at a private Christian institution, found herself grappling with profound existential questions about the nature of God following her harrowing ordeal with sex trafficking. She noted, "how could God let me go through this, how could God let these things happen, how could God make these God-awful people that cheat on their wives and ask for really weird things?" Similarly, Annabel recalled that her mother, who was involved in her trafficking, received the greeting, "God bless you," from her counselor. Annabel found it challenging to accept her counselor's greeting, noting "Why would you even say that like you're basically saying like that for Him [God] to bless [my mother]. [S]he's supposed to be the one helping me [but she is involved in trafficking me]." On the other end, some participants expressed having religion as a coping mechanism while being trafficked. Crystal shared God's grace in her life, providing a way out of trafficking, "with no ID, I had a social security card [and] the birth certificate with two last names that didn't match. So that was the grace of God that got me here [into safety and away from trafficking]."

Spirituality and Religion After Trafficking

The second subtheme that emerged from the spiritual dimension was evident in all ten participants' interviews. Following sex trafficking, some participants expressed the challenge of reconciling with their religion and/or spirituality. Niki shared her struggles throughout her spiritual path: "the spirituality piece for me that I'm trying to do right now is just to try to find positive things in every day and it's hard. But that's- that's- that's where I'm at." Mia, who grew up in a Christian home attending church, had traffickers subject her to spiritual abuse. She poignantly captured the challenge she continued to experience with religion and spirituality sharing, "what they did to me spiritually was actually a hundred times worse than what they did emotionally, physically, sexually to me." She added, "for me the spiritual and the abortion were actually almost more traumatizing to me…I'm still a very strong Christian but untangling the mess that they created by telling me that that's why I was born <looked down>."

On the other hand, Cassie's experience with religion moved from atheism immediately following her life of trafficking to one of connection and growth through Christianity. She explained how she was "very angry with the Lord … at some point in life", yet believed that she had "divine intervention which brought back my faith … But it's been a long road, …and so it was that moment … where [the Lord] stepped in and said, 'all right, I got you." A positive connection/ reconnection with religion, specifically Christianity, was also evident in other participants' narratives following their life of being trafficked. Crystal shared, "I was talking to [God] and I said, I

just want my life back and He said, 'but I have a better life waiting for you' … I have a relationship with the Lord that I never had before." She expressed the capacity to view the challenges she experienced as "worth it" because it paved the way to where she is, at peace.

Psychological: "A Very Negative Mindset"

All participants endured traumatic circumstances, leading to profound and enduring psychological impacts that "disrupt your everyday living," as noted by Jennifer. Monica added that trafficking fostered "a very negative mindset for a very long time." We classified this theme into two subthemes: (a) *mental health challenges* and *(b) feeling like an empty shell.*

Mental Health Issues

All survivors reported various symptoms affecting their daily lives, such as triggers (n = 7), shame and guilt (n = 7), fear (n = 5), anger (n = 5), emotional numbing (n = 3), suicidal (n = 3) and homicidal thoughts (n = 2), body image issues (n = 2), and self-harm (n = 1). Their experiences altered their perceptions of self, others, and the world. Nik i summarized, "I don't look at anything the same anymore." The abuse, in conjunction with the manipulation, led to feelings of guilt and shame that impacted their recovery. Mia explained, "I think with trafficking that's one of the challenges is, we're actively participating." She added, "as much as we're a victim, we're not a victim in the traditional sense of victim <whispered> I was good at it." Survivors faced constant triggers, ranging from religious objects like crosses (Annabel), to specific music, songs (Betty), smells (Mia), or objects (e.g., couches, jewelry, clothes; Monica). "I've even triggered myself, with my own voice," Monica added. These reminders induced fear, anxiety and/or emotional numbing. "There's always like this instinct…that check…that I have to push through doing things that are supposed to be normal," explained Niki. Even though many of them self-described as "excellent in crisis situations," Jes added that there is "deep deep deep deep rage, that is inside your body, and if you don't understand how to release that, um you can be very dangerous." The cumulative effect led to suicide attempts by Annabel, Cassie, and Monica, self-injury by Anabel for years, and homicidal thoughts by Jes.

As such, survivors received diagnoses for various mental health disorders, including eating disorders (n = 2), dissociative disorders (n = 3), bipolar disorder (n = 3), anxiety disorders (n = 3), depressive disorders (n = 7), posttraumatic stress disorder (n = 8), and substance-related and addictive disorders (n = 9). Participants illustrated how symptoms emerged as protective or coping mechanisms. Annabel explained, "DID [dissociative identity disorder] has been a liability to me in so many ways, but…the dissociation protected me. I was able to cut off all the pain." Jes discussed how trauma-related or anxious symptoms developed as a survival mode, "I had to learn how to control my exterior while being in complete chaos on the inside…someone's dying literally in front of me and I'm just having to be stoic and calm." Consequently, many participants developed intrusive symptoms such as nightmares and flashbacks. Monica explained that she typically requests a table "facing the entrance and the exit at the same time" to monitor the entire room. Six participants discussed experiencing repressed memories, with Mia unable to recall most of her childhood until the age of 21. Four participants took medication for their psychological symptoms. Finally, participants discussed the pervasive comorbidity between sex trafficking and substance-related disorders during and after sex trafficking. Five participants knew they were being drugged during their experience. Some voluntarily took them to "tolerate what they were doing to me," as explained by Annabel or "stay numb," as shared by Monica. Yet, Crystal shared that although "supposedly statistics are like 80% of women or men, children being trafficked are on drugs, I can guarantee you if they know it or not, it's like 99 or

100." After being trafficked, many stated that the use of drugs helped manage symptoms.

Feeling Like an Empty Shell

Almost all participants (9 out of 10) spoke that after years of mistreatment, they struggled with self-worth, confidence, self-love, autonomy, and accepting kindness. Cassie stated, "We're so empty or like at this empty shell when we come out of that…I had zero self-confidence." Crystal highlighted the long-term impact, "it almost destroyed me…that confidence piece, you feel like who's ever going to want me now, I'm ruined." Control over their minds and bodies removed their ability to explore their interests, desires, and even their identity. Monica explained, "We are mentally unstable, and we were just in this mental state that has been told to us on how to think, how to act, how to dress, etc." She continues, "in a space where we can go get that poke bowl if we want it just because, or we can go to Disney just because…we need that reminder because we're constantly still fighting that fight-or-flight response."

As such, participants saw the need to work on loving themselves and regaining a sense of control. Jes shares her path to healing, "when a person feels like there's something innately wrong with them, that I am just somehow defective, that's the biggest lie that we could believe, any of us." She added, "when a person can take that journey and just say, yeah I'm worthy and I'm enough right now, that's the biggest gift we can give ourselves." Annabel expressed how she constantly reminded herself that she is "allowed to have a voice, I'm allowed to take up space, I'm allowed to breathe." Mia wanted more than "simply being a survivor." She elaborated, "I legally changed my name and, for me, it was just this empowerment of I'm not going to let them dictate who I am." Monica tattooed freedom into her arm. "It's my reminder, daily…like I'm free, I know I'm doing everything for me authentically and that's all I can do."

DISCUSSION

Our study explored first-hand accounts from survivors on the mental health consequences of sex trafficking. Participants' accounts reveal the severe and enduring physical harm inflicted upon them during sex trafficking, echoing findings from the literature (e.g., Oram et al., 2016). The vivid descriptions of violence and abuse underscore the pervasive nature of the trauma endured, leading to long-term consequences such as chronic pain, surgeries, and persistent discomfort. Survivors' accounts highlight the psychosomatic manifestations of trauma, where psychological distress manifests as physical symptoms or worsens existing health conditions. The intersection of sex trafficking trauma and disability is a critical area that demands more attention in both research and clinical practice. Trafficking survivors like Annabel often face compounded challenges as they navigate the aftermath of their experiences, with disabilities that may be both visible and invisible. This intersection is particularly important because it highlights how sex trafficking not only strips individuals of their autonomy and safety but also leaves them with long-term impairments that can affect their quality of life and access to care (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2022b). Integrating discussions of disability into the broader conversation about trafficking is essential for developing more comprehensive support systems for survivors. The physical and cognitive disabilities resulting from sex trafficking trauma require tailored interventions and an understanding of the unique needs of this population.

The participants' narratives highlight the significant challenges survivors face in reintegrating into the workforce and pursuing education after leaving sex trafficking. These barriers include gaps in employment, criminal records, and lack of experience, which hinder survivors' ability to secure stable employment and access educational opportunities. These findings contribute to literature on pathways to recovery and

social reintegration (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Mumey et al., 2021) and align with recommendations for counselors (Litam, 2017; Thompson et al., 2018). The participants' stories of resilience and empowerment in building financial stability offer valuable insights into survivor-led approaches to economic recovery.

All participants emphasized the impact sex trafficking had on their relationships – with others and themselves. They described how connections with traffickers continued to shape their post-trafficking identities, with emotional attachments often leading to complex dynamics of ongoing exploitation or even reconciliation. Many found it difficult to trust others and set healthy boundaries, often developing rigid boundaries out of fear. This underscores how connection can support or exacerbate psychological distress, reinforcing the need for trustworthy and safe professional relationships that validate survivors, promote disclosure of sensitive information, and reduce re-traumatization (Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2022b; Litam, 2017; Thompson & Haley, 2018).

Following sex trafficking, participants grappled with the challenge of reconciling their experiences with their spirituality and religious beliefs. Participants' experience of spiritual abuse underscored the profound trauma inflicted beyond physical and emotional harm, complicating their relationship with religion despite their strong faith. These discoveries contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding routes to recovery and societal reintegration (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Mumey et al., 2021). While religion and spirituality were coping mechanisms for some during trafficking, others found it challenging to maintain positivity in their spiritual journey post-trauma, underscoring the enduring impact of trafficking on their spiritual well-being.

Challenges experienced within their physical, vocational, relational, and spiritual domains influenced how their psychological symptoms presented. Many received diagnoses for various mental health disorders, reflecting the pervasive impact of trafficking on psychological well-being, supporting existing research (Banu et al., 2021; Chu et al., 2022; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Mumey et al., 2021; Oram et al., 2016; Trudeau et al., 2021). Taking a multidimensional perspective, we transcend a mere focus on psychological distress, uncovering challenges across multiple domains that exacerbate survivors' symptoms and hinder care. Notably, we observe how relational difficulties such as trust and safety with others can prevent survivors from confiding in counselors and seeking support. Physical pain, medical concerns, and vocational challenges affected survivors' everyday life and created additional instability. Negative connections or disconnections with religion and spirituality significantly impacted participants' healing journeys, disrupting their sense of peace. Thus, exploring psychological distress from a systemic viewpoint enables us to grasp how different aspects of survivors' lives affect their overall well-being significantly. This emphasis is crucial as it directs attention toward systemic and societal changes aimed at reducing psychological distress, rather than solely targeting individual risk factors (e.g., exposure to trauma) or protective factors (e.g., resilience).

Implications

The findings emphasized the deep psychological effects felt by survivors of sexual trauma, emphasizing the critical importance for counselors to have the tools to effectively address their mental health needs. Survivors exhibited a range of symptoms, significantly altering their perceptions of self, others, and the world. Survivors, like Annabel, often developed mental health disorders to cope in response to their traumatic experiences. Similarly, trauma-related or anxiety symptoms served as survival mechanisms for Jes, enabling her to maintain composure amidst chaos. Counselors must possess a nuanced understanding of these coping mechanisms and tailor interventions accordingly. Counselors must also provide trauma-informed care to help survivors manage intrusive

symptoms and regain a sense of safety and control. Survivors often described feeling like empty shells, devoid of self-worth, confidence, and autonomy. Counselors play a pivotal role in supporting survivors as they embark on the journey of self-discovery, rebuilding their self-esteem, and reclaiming their sense of agency. Through empathy, validation, and empowerment, counselors can help survivors cultivate self-compassion and self-love, reconnect with their authentic selves, and rediscover their passions and aspirations.

Additionally, our findings highlighted the psychological impact of sex trafficking extends to every area of a survivor's life. Counselors need to recognize the pervasive physical harm endured by sex trafficking survivors to address their physical health needs stemming from sex trafficking alongside their psychological concerns. This may involve referring survivors to medical professionals, advocating for comprehensive healthcare services, and incorporating holistic approaches to healing, while counselors explore collaboration with healthcare providers to ensure appropriate medical care and support. Counselors also need to recognize employment challenges faced by sex trafficking survivors. Counselors might need to prioritize assisting survivors in creating financial stability post-trafficking such as providing financial literacy, education or vocational training, and exploring career options that are non-triggering, align with their healing journey, and reclaim agency and empowerment. Survivors might also need help navigating work-related stressors and disclosure decisions in the workplace, considering the potential impact on relationships with coworkers and the emotional toll of hiding their experiences. Our findings also highlighted the importance of tailored counseling strategies addressing survivors' unique relational struggles and identity transformations following sex trafficking, fostering healing and meaningful recovery journeys. Counselors can help survivors set appropriate boundaries and support them in reclaiming their identities, fostering self-compassion, and reframing their narratives positively. Our findings also emphasized the importance of integrating spirituality into trauma-informed counseling approaches for sex trafficking survivors, acknowledging the complexity of their spiritual experiences and supporting them in finding meaning, healing, and spiritual growth after sex trafficking. Counseling can focus on reframing spiritual narratives, exploring alternative spiritual practices, or facilitating discussions around existential meaning beyond traditional religious frameworks.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study's findings should be interpreted with caution due to several limitations. The sample primarily consisted of survivors accessing support services, potentially excluding those who have not sought counseling and may have different experiences. Additionally, the sample's composition, primarily comprising White women, may not fully represent the diverse experiences of survivors from different racial, ethnic, and gender identities. Geographic location and cultural background were also limited, highlighting the need for broader inclusion of survivors from diverse backgrounds to enhance understanding of how multiple marginalized identities intersect to shape vulnerability to trafficking and access to support services. The data also relies on self-reporting, which may be subject to recall bias, social desirability bias, or inaccuracies in reporting. Although we provide some information regarding the survivors' experiences of sex trafficking, we do not dive into contextual information about the specific sex trafficking circumstances and its relationship to their symptoms or presenting issues. Counselors need to understand the duration and type of exploitation, trafficker tactics, and support systems for a holistic picture of the client. Our focus on the multidimensional impact of sex trafficking limits our narrative to expand on factors influencing survivors' experiences and needs. We also focused overall on the negative impact of sex trafficking. Future studies need to adopt a strength-based

approach that can emphasize survivors' resilience, agency coping strategies, and posttraumatic growth. There is also a need for research on trauma-informed career counseling for sex trafficking survivors that integrates mental health support with career development. Future research can also investigate systemic vulnerabilities that address the root causes of sex trafficking. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the nuanced nature of healing, recovery, resilience, and well-being.

CONCLUSION

Our exploration of survivors' experiences reveals the extensive impact of sex trafficking across physical, relational, spiritual, and psychological dimensions, with survivors facing complex challenges in trust and boundary-setting in relationships. The rupture in survivors' spiritual beliefs and subsequent journeys toward reconciliation highlight profound spiritual turmoil. Enduring psychological impacts include triggers, shame, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse, leading survivors to feel depleted of self-worth and autonomy. Despite these challenges, survivors demonstrate resilience in seeking healing and reclaiming agency, emphasizing a holistic approach through comprehensive support systems.

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About Human Trafficking

Human trafficking, also called trafficking in persons, has no place in our world. As both a grave crime and a human rights abuse, it compromises national and economic security, undermines the rule of law, and harms the well-being of individuals and communities everywhere. It is a crime of exploitation. Traffickers profit at the expense of their victims by compelling them to perform labor or to engage in commercial sex in every region of the United States and around the world. With an estimated 27.6 million victims worldwide at any given time, human traffickers prey on people of all ages, backgrounds, and nationalities, exploiting them for their own profit.

LEARN MORE

- Human Trafficking in the United States
- Understanding Human Trafficking
- Prosecution, Protection, Prevention, and Partnership
- Victims of Human Trafficking
- Who are the Traffickers?
- Human Trafficking vs. Migrant Smuggling
- How Many Victims of Human Trafficking Are There?

Human Trafficking in the United States

In the United States, traffickers compel victims to engage in commercial sex and to work in both legal and illicit industries and sectors, including in hospitality, traveling sales crews, agriculture, janitorial services, construction, landscaping, restaurants, factories, care for persons with disabilities, salon services, massage parlors, retail services, fairs and carnivals, peddling and begging, drug smuggling and distribution, religious institutions, child care, and domestic work.

Understanding Human Trafficking

"Trafficking in persons," "human trafficking," and "modern slavery" are umbrella terms – often used interchangeably – to refer to a crime whereby traffickers exploit and profit at the expense of adults or children by compelling them to perform labor or engage in commercial sex. When a person younger than 18 is used to perform a commercial sex act, it is a crime regardless of whether there is any force, fraud, or coercion involved.

The United States recognizes two primary forms of trafficking in persons: forced labor and sex trafficking. The basic meaning of these forms of human trafficking and some unique characteristics of each are set forth below, followed by several key principles and concepts that relate to all forms of human trafficking.

More than 175 nations have ratified or acceded to the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (the UN TIP Protocol), which defines trafficking in persons and contains obligations to prevent and combat the crime.

The United States' Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, as amended (TVPA), and the UN TIP Protocol contain similar definitions of human trafficking. The elements of both definitions can be described using a three-element framework focused on the trafficker's 1) acts; 2) means; and 3) purpose. All three elements are essential to form a human trafficking violation.

Forced Labor

Forced Labor, sometimes also referred to as labor trafficking, encompasses the range of activities involved when a person uses force, fraud, or coercion to exploit the labor or services of another person.

The **"acts"** element of forced labor is met when the trafficker recruits, harbors, transports, provides, or obtains a person for labor or services.

The **"means"** element of forced labor includes a trafficker's use of force, fraud, or coercion. The coercive scheme can include threats of force, debt manipulation, withholding of pay, confiscation of identity documents, psychological coercion, reputational harm, manipulation of the use of addictive substances, threats to other people, or other forms of coercion.

The **"purpose"** element focuses on the perpetrator's goal to exploit a

person's labor or services. There is no limit on the location or type of industry. Traffickers can commit this crime in any sector or setting, whether legal or illicit, including but not limited to agricultural fields, factories, restaurants, hotels, massage parlors, retail stores, fishing vessels, mines, private homes, or drug trafficking operations.

All three elements are essential to constitute the crime of forced labor.

There are certain types of forced labor that are frequently distinguished for emphasis or because they are widespread:

Domestic Servitude

"Domestic servitude" is a form of forced labor in which the trafficker requires a victim to perform work in a private residence. Such circumstances create unique vulnerabilities. Domestic workers are often isolated and may work alone in a house. Their employer often controls their access to food, transportation, and housing. What happens in a private residence is hidden from the world – including from law enforcement and labor inspectors – resulting in barriers to victim identification. Foreign domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to abuse due to language and cultural barriers, as well as a lack of community ties. Some perpetrators use these types of conditions as part of their coercive schemes to compel the labor of domestic workers with little risk of detection.

Forced Child Labor

The term "forced child labor" describes forced labor schemes in which traffickers compel children to work. Traffickers often target children because they are more vulnerable. Although some children may legally engage in certain forms of work, forcing or coercing children to work remains illegal. Forms of slavery or slavery-like practices – including the sale of children, forced or compulsory child labor, and debt bondage and serfdom of children – continue to exist, despite legal prohibitions and widespread

condemnation. Some indicators of forced labor of a child include situations in which the child appears to be in the custody of a non-family member and the child's work financially benefits someone outside the child's family; or the denial of food, rest, or schooling to a child who is working.

Sex Trafficking

Sex trafficking encompasses the range of activities involved when a trafficker uses force, fraud, or coercion to compel another person to engage in a commercial sex act or causes a child to engage in a commercial sex act.

The crime of sex trafficking is also understood through the "acts," "means," and "purpose" framework. All three elements are required to establish a sex trafficking crime (except in the case of child sex trafficking where the means are irrelevant).

The **"acts"** element of sex trafficking is met when a trafficker recruits, harbors, transports, provides, obtains, patronizes, or solicits another person to engage in commercial sex.

The **"means"** element of sex trafficking occurs when a trafficker uses force, fraud, or coercion. Coercion in the case of sex trafficking includes the broad array of means included in the forced labor definition. These can include threats of serious harm, psychological harm, reputational harm, threats to others, and debt manipulation.

The **"purpose"** element is a commercial sex act. Sex trafficking can take place in private homes, massage parlors, hotels, or brothels, among other locations, as well as on the internet.

Child Sex Trafficking

In cases where an individual engages in any of the specified "acts" with a child (under the age of 18), the means element is irrelevant regardless of whether evidence of force, fraud, or coercion exists. The use of children in

commercial sex is prohibited by law in the United States and most countries around the world.

Key Principles and Concepts

These key principles and concepts relate to all forms of trafficking in persons, including forced labor and sex trafficking.

Consent

Human trafficking can take place even if the victim initially consented to providing labor, services, or commercial sex acts. The analysis is primarily focused on the trafficker's conduct and not that of the victim. A trafficker can target a victim after a victim applies for a job or migrates to earn a living. The trafficker's exploitative scheme is what matters, not a victim's prior consent or ability to meaningfully consent thereafter. Likewise, in a sex trafficking case, an adult victim's initial willingness to engage in commercial sex acts is not relevant where a perpetrator subsequently uses force, fraud, or coercion to exploit the victim and cause them to continue engaging in the same acts. In the case of child sex trafficking, the consent of the victim is never relevant as a child cannot legally consent to commercial sex.

Movement

Neither U.S. law nor international law requires that a trafficker or victim move across a border for a human trafficking offense to take place. Trafficking in persons is a crime of exploitation and coercion, and not movement. Traffickers can use schemes that take victims hundreds of miles away from their homes or exploit them in the same neighborhoods where they were born.

Debt Bondage

"Debt bondage" is focused on human trafficking crimes in which the trafficker's primary means of coercion is debt manipulation. U.S. law

prohibits perpetrators from using debts as part of their scheme, plan, or pattern to compel a person to work or engage in commercial sex. Traffickers target some individuals with an initial debt assumed willingly as a condition of future employment, while in certain countries traffickers tell individuals they "inherited" the debt from relatives. Traffickers can also manipulate debts after the economic relationship begins by withholding earnings or forcing the victim to assume debts for expenses like food, housing, or transportation. They can also manipulate debts a victim owes to other people. When traffickers use debts as a means to compel labor or commercial sex, they have committed a crime.

Non-Penalization

Governments should not penalize or prosecute victims of trafficking in persons for the unlawful acts traffickers compelled them to commit. This principle aims to protect victims from being held legally responsible for conduct that was not their choice, but rather was driven by traffickers. If a government has penalized or punished a victim in such a way, the government should vacate the conviction and/or expunge the victim's record.

State-Sponsored Human Trafficking

While the TVPA and UN TIP Protocol call on governments to proactively address trafficking crimes, some governments are part of the problem, directly compelling their citizens into sexual slavery or forced labor schemes. From forced labor in local or national public work projects, military operations, and economically important sectors, or as part of government-funded projects or missions abroad, officials use their power to exploit their nationals. To extract this work, governments coerce by threatening the withdrawal of public benefits, withholding salaries, failing to adhere to limits on national service, manipulating the lack of legal status of stateless individuals and members of minority groups, threatening to punish family members, or conditioning services or freedom of movement on labor or sex.

In 2019, Congress amended the TVPA to acknowledge that governments can also act as traffickers, referring specifically to a "government policy or pattern" of human trafficking, trafficking in government-funded programs, forced labor in government-affiliated medical services or other sectors, sexual slavery in government camps, or the employment or recruitment of child soldiers.

Unlawful Recruitment or Use of Child Soldiers

Another manifestation of human trafficking occurs when government forces or any non-state armed group unlawfully recruits or uses children – through force, fraud, or coercion – as soldiers or for labor or services in conflict situations. Children are also used as sex slaves. Sexual slavery, as referred to here, occurs when armed groups force or coerce children to "marry" or be raped by commanders or combatants. Both male and female children are often sexually abused or exploited by members of armed groups and suffer the same types of devastating physical and psychological consequences associated with sex trafficking.

Accountability in Supply Chains

Forced labor is well documented in the private economy, particularly in agriculture, fishing, manufacturing, construction, and domestic work; but no sector is immune. Sex trafficking occurs in several industries as well. Most well-known is the hospitality industry, but the crime also occurs in connection with extractive industries where activities are often remote and lack meaningful government presence. Governments should hold all entities, including businesses, accountable for human trafficking. In some countries, the law provides for corporate accountability in both the civil and criminal justice systems. U.S. law provides such liability for any legal person, including a business that benefits financially from its involvement in a human trafficking scheme, provided that the business knew or should have known of the scheme.

Prosecution, Protection, Prevention, and Partnership

The "3P" paradigm—prosecution, protection, and prevention—continues to serve as the fundamental framework used around the world to combat human trafficking. The United States also follows this approach, reflected in the United States' Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, as amended (TVPA), and in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Protocol). In addition, a fourth "P"—for partnership—serves as a complementary means to achieve progress across the 3Ps and enlist all segments of society in the fight against human trafficking.

Victims of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking victims can be of any age, race, ethnicity, sex, gender

identity, sexual orientation, nationality, immigration status, cultural background, religion, socio-economic class, and education attainment level. In the United States, individuals vulnerable to human trafficking include children in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, including foster care; runaway and homeless youth; unaccompanied foreign national children without lawful immigration status; individuals seeking asylum; American Indians and Alaska Natives, particularly women and girls; individuals with substance use issues; racial or ethnic minorities; migrant laborers, including undocumented workers and participants in visa programs for temporary workers; foreign national domestic workers in diplomatic households; persons with limited English proficiency; persons with disabilities; LGBTQI+ individuals; and victims of intimate partner violence or other forms of domestic violence.

Who are the Traffickers?

At the heart of this phenomenon is the traffickers' aim to profit from the exploitation of their victims and the myriad coercive and deceptive practices they use to do so. Traffickers can be strangers, acquaintances, or even family members, and they prey on the vulnerable and on those seeking opportunities to build for themselves a brighter future.

Human Trafficking vs. Migrant Smuggling

Human trafficking can include, but does not require, movement. Human trafficking is distinct from the separate crime of migrant smuggling. Human trafficking occurs when a trafficker uses force, fraud, or coercion to compel another person to work or engage in a commercial sex act. It sometimes involves crossing a border but does not require it. By contrast, migrant smugglers engage in the crime of bringing people across international borders through deliberate evasion of immigration laws. While these are distinct crimes, individuals who are smuggled may become vulnerable to and victims of human trafficking.

How Many Victims of Human Trafficking Are There?

It is hard to find reliable statistics related to human trafficking. The quality and quantity of data available are often hampered by the hidden nature of the crime, challenges in identifying individual victims, gaps in data accuracy and completeness, and significant barriers regarding the sharing of victim information among various stakeholders. For these reasons, data and statistics may not reflect the full nature or scope of the problem.

International Labour Organization

The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Walk Free Foundation, in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), released Global Estimates of Modern Slavery in September 2022. This report estimates that, at any given time in 2021, approximately 27.6 million people were in forced labor. Of these, "17.3 million are exploited in the private sector, 6.3 million in forced commercial sexual exploitation, and 3.9 million in forced labour imposed by state." The definition of forced labor used in this report is based on ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), which states in Article 2.1 that forced labor is "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily."

This report also estimates that 49.6 million people were in "modern slavery" at any given time in 2021, but this figure includes both the estimate for forced labor and an estimate for forced marriage. Consistent with current implementation of U.S. law, it is recommended to use only the 27.6 million estimate when referring to human trafficking. While some instances of forced marriage may meet the international or U.S. legal definition of human trafficking, not all cases do. Note further that the term "modern slavery" is not defined in international or U.S. law.

In addition, the National Human Trafficking Hotline provides on its website data sets on the issue of human trafficking in the United States. These data

sets are based on aggregated information learned through phone calls, emails, online tips, and texts the hotline receives and should not be confused with prevalence studies or closed-out confirmed cases. Note that the hotline receives several types of calls in addition to those about human trafficking cases. The hotline does not verify the accuracy of information reported, but it determines on a case-by-case basis whether the information should be passed on to an appropriate local, state, or federal investigative and/or service agency equipped to investigate the tip and/or respond to the needs of the potential victim.