



Office for Protection of Children

1229 Mt. Loretta • P.O. Box 479 • Dubuque, Iowa 52004-0479
Phone (563) 556-2580 FAX (563) 556-5464
Email: dbqcopc@arch.pvt.k12.ia.us

Human Trafficking: Dispelling 10 Myths

Human Trafficking is an issue that has received extensive attention lately in local and national news. Many of us have heard about cases of human trafficking through community presentations or through public service announcements. We may be aware of the emergence of new non-profit organizations explaining an anti-trafficking mission statement. We may have listened to the President of the United States, in September 2012, announce that combating human trafficking is a priority for our country. However, are we aware of how human trafficking individually affects each one of us?



The U.S. government defines human trafficking as “sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery” (Trafficking Victims Protection Act). This definition can be confusing and is often misunderstood. To better understand human trafficking and how it affects each of us in our daily lives, it is important to first dispel some of the common myths. Below is an examination of the 10 most common myths and misconceptions regarding human trafficking within the United States.

Myth 10: Victims of human trafficking are only “foreign nationals.” On the contrary, most cases of trafficking, and particularly sex trafficking in the United States, involve U.S.-born citizens. Of the multitude of cases stacked on my desk, about 85 percent of them involve victims born in the United States. Traffickers prey on the vulnerabilities of their intended victims, depriving them of their human dignity and worth for the purposes of profit, regardless of the victim’s country of birth.

Myth 9: Human trafficking is a crime that involves some form of travel or transportation. The term “trafficking” is very misleading. Most people believe that a victim must be moved from one location to another, or across state or international borders. Transportation is only one element. It is important for us to remember that victims could be exploited in their own states, their own neighborhoods, or even their own homes. We need to pay particular attention to the reality that our children, one of the most vulnerable and sought-after populations by traffickers, could be victims of trafficking and yet could still come home every night for dinner, sleep in their own beds, and be present at school every day, as the traffickers will do whatever they need to do to avoid detection. This often leads to victims of sex trafficking being misidentified, and their victimization may never be realized and/or treated.

Myth 8: Human trafficking is just another phrase for “human smuggling.” Trafficking persons and smuggling them are two crimes that are inherently different in nature. We often confuse the two thinking that human trafficking refers to the act of illegally transporting a foreign national into the United States from a foreign country. In actuality, human smuggling is a crime against the state and consists of an individual consenting to be moved across international borders and paying a smuggler to assist in this endeavor. Conversely, human trafficking is a crime against a person; the human being is exploited for the purposes of profit through force, fraud or coercion.

Myth 7: There must be elements of physical force, physical restraint or physical bondage to qualify the act as a form of trafficking. It is easier for us to envision a scenario where a trafficker holds a gun to the person’s head and forces them to engage in a commercial sex act or other crime. However, it is more difficult for us to sympathize or understand how a person is coerced or induced into the same act by someone taking advantage of their personal vulnerabilities. Regardless, we need to remember that the victimization aspect is the same. Coercion to induce someone into a life of servitude and slavery can deliver a greater degree of psychological damage because the person was manipulated to believe that he or she was complicit. In situations where the victim believes that he or she agreed to engage in the conduct, there is an increase in self-blame and personal shame on behalf of the victim.

Myth 6: Victims of human trafficking will always ask for help or self-identify as a victim. Traffickers employ a large amount of psychological manipulation as a means of power and control over their victims. As a result, the victims are made to believe that they consented to their own victimization, and in some instances, they believe that they themselves are the offenders. In this way, victims of trafficking will rarely seek help or report these cases to the proper authorities.

Myth 5: Victims of human trafficking always come from situations of poverty or from small rural villages.

Recalling that traffickers target vulnerable persons, economic vulnerabilities comprise only one vulnerability out of several that traffickers will use. When targeting our children, traffickers typically look for other vulnerabilities, such as attention-seeking individuals, those who have low self-esteem and children who lack an understanding of healthy relationships or boundaries. In these instances, the traffickers never have to provide their victims with monetary rewards; rather, they offer a semblance of love and affection to a child who is not being fulfilled at home.

Myth 4: Sex trafficking is the only form of human trafficking. It is important to remember that the term human trafficking is a very broad term that includes the exploitation of human beings for the purposes of labor as well. This most commonly occurs within hospitality services, agricultural and manufacturing industries, domestic servitude and peddling.

Myth 3: Human trafficking only occurs in illegal, underground industries. The reality is that human trafficking in the forms of both labor and sex occur right in front of us. Regardless of whether we live in middle-class suburbia, wealthy downtown business districts or subsidized housing, trafficking is occurring. Additionally, there are consumers of sexual trafficking within each of these types of neighborhoods. More importantly, our children that are living in each of these environments are also vulnerable to the traffickers' deceptions.

Myth 2: If an individual initially consented to the sexual trafficking situation, then it voids the crime. Debatably, no one can consent to exploit themselves, and certainly no child under the age of 18. Whether it is labor trafficking or sex trafficking, a person cannot fully understand the mental, emotional and physical abuse that they will endure while being exploited. The human brain is wired for intimacy. In every sexual act, the human brain needs an emotional attachment to the sexual partner, or at minimum, a physical attraction to appropriately process the sexual encounter. Devoid of this attachment, engaging in a sex act, particularly a commercial sex act, cannot properly be interpreted by the brain. Therefore, the effects on the brain of commercial sex are equivalent to the worst types of sexual abuse. However, at the time the victim consciously consents, their brain cannot subconsciously fathom the effects on the brain and body.

Myth 1: Human trafficking does not happen where I live. Most people think that human trafficking is an international crime that does not have domestic victims, or they do not realize that human trafficking directly affects them. The unsettling truth is that every community and every home in America is at risk to falling victim to human trafficking; the most vulnerable group being our children. It is estimated that at least 100,000 U.S. children are induced into the commercial sex trade every year in the United States. The traffickers exploit our children because of particular vulnerabilities that impressionable young people possess. These vulnerabilities fall into four main categories: economic vulnerabilities, victims of prior abuse (sexual or physical), situational vulnerabilities (homeless or runaway children) and "other at-risk" vulnerabilities, which includes children with low self-esteem, attention-seeking youth, children from "broken" homes or children who lack understanding of healthy relationships. It is essential to understand that these "other at-risk" youth are the children that are in our schools, live in our neighborhoods, attend our churches and youth groups and are even living in our homes.

The occurrence of the white work van abducting our children from street corners and forcing them into a life of prostitution is very rare. Rather, it is smooth words and empty promises that target and exploit these vulnerabilities of our children to force them into a life of sex, primarily with strangers. And as the traffickers exploit technology to enhance their abilities of recruiting, specifically through social media, their ability to reach our children becomes more of reality, and calls for increased vigilance by parents and society as a whole. To protect our children, it is important to have an understanding of what human trafficking looks like within our communities and our neighborhoods. Awareness of the issue and acceptance that our families are vulnerable is the first step in combating human trafficking.

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